

A STUDY OF BHAKTA RAVIDĀSA



DARSHAN SINGH



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**Guru Gobind Singh Department of Religious Studies,
Punjabi University, Patiala**

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BHAKTA RAVIDĀSA**

by
DR. DARSHAN SINGH

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FOREWORD

In one sense the life and personality of Santa Ravidāsa illustrate one of the great sayings of the Buddha :

*na jaccā vasalo hoti, na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo/
kammunā vasalo hoti, kammunā hoti brāhmaṇo/
Suttanipāta, Vasalasutta.*

“Not by birth does one become an untouchable, not by birth does one become a *brāhmaṇa*; by deeds one becomes an untouchable, by deeds one becomes a *brāhmaṇa*”. The socio-religious context of the life and work of Ravidāsa had indeed a long tradition in India. Contrary to popular belief, religious leadership even of the Vedic-Brāhmaṇic communities of ancient and medieval India was not solely confined to members of higher castes or upper classes. One of the most influential figures in the traditional history of India and a putative author of the *Purāṇas* & the *Mahābhārata* was Kṛṣṇa-Dvaipāyana, better known as Rṣi Vedavyāsa. He had a mixed origin. Janaka-Videha, Aśvapati-Kaikāya, Pravāhaṇa-Jaivālī, and Ajātaśatru of Kāśi and Magadha, who were the leaders and teachers of Upaniṣadic Vedānta, were not *brāhmaṇas* by caste; they were *kṣatriyas*. The epic traditions know several influential personalities of humble origin who instructed learned *brāhmaṇas* and royal princes on moral and religious subjects. The founders of Buddhism, Jainism and Sāṃkhya-Yoga were also not members of the priestly class of *brāhmaṇas*.

A series of great religious teachers known as the Siddhas flourished in North India during early medieval centuries. A large number of them came from the lowest strata of Indian society. These Siddhas were pan-Indian masters of esoteric culture, devotional ritualism, and ascetic ecstasy. Though they belonged to the *śūdra* caste, they vindicated their authority and prestige in the society through their high religious achievements.

The Siddhas were soon followed by a remarkable group of Santas or saint-poets who effected a veritable revolution in the

social and religious life of medieval India. Santa Ravidāsa was one of the brightest luminaries in the firmament of medieval Indian bhaktic renaissance. His life and thought constitute an important facet of the history of Vaiṣṇavism and Sikhism.

My old and beloved pupil Darshan Singh Chahil has spent a good deal of his time and energy in the study of the works and thoughts of Ravidāsa. He has consulted all the so far published relevant and important materials bearing on the life and religious poetry of this saint and reformer. His treatment of the subject is scientific and judicious. Darshan Singh Chahil has been a keen and devoted student of medieval Indian religious ideas. He has received academic training in the study of religious phenomena at two of the noted centres of learning in the relevant area. He holds M.A. and M.Litt. degrees in Religious Studies from the Punjabi University, Patiala. He has been one of the first and best students of our Department of Religious Studies. Recently he has spent a fruitful year at the Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., where he earned "Certificate of Advanced Study in Comparative Religion". I look forward to the flowering of his adventures in the scientific investigation of human religiousness.

It is hoped that his treatise on Ravidāsa will be found useful by all students of Indian piety and theology.

Guru Gobind Singh Bhavan
Punjabi University, Patiala
30 June, 1981

L.M. JOSHI
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Head of the Department of Religious Studies*

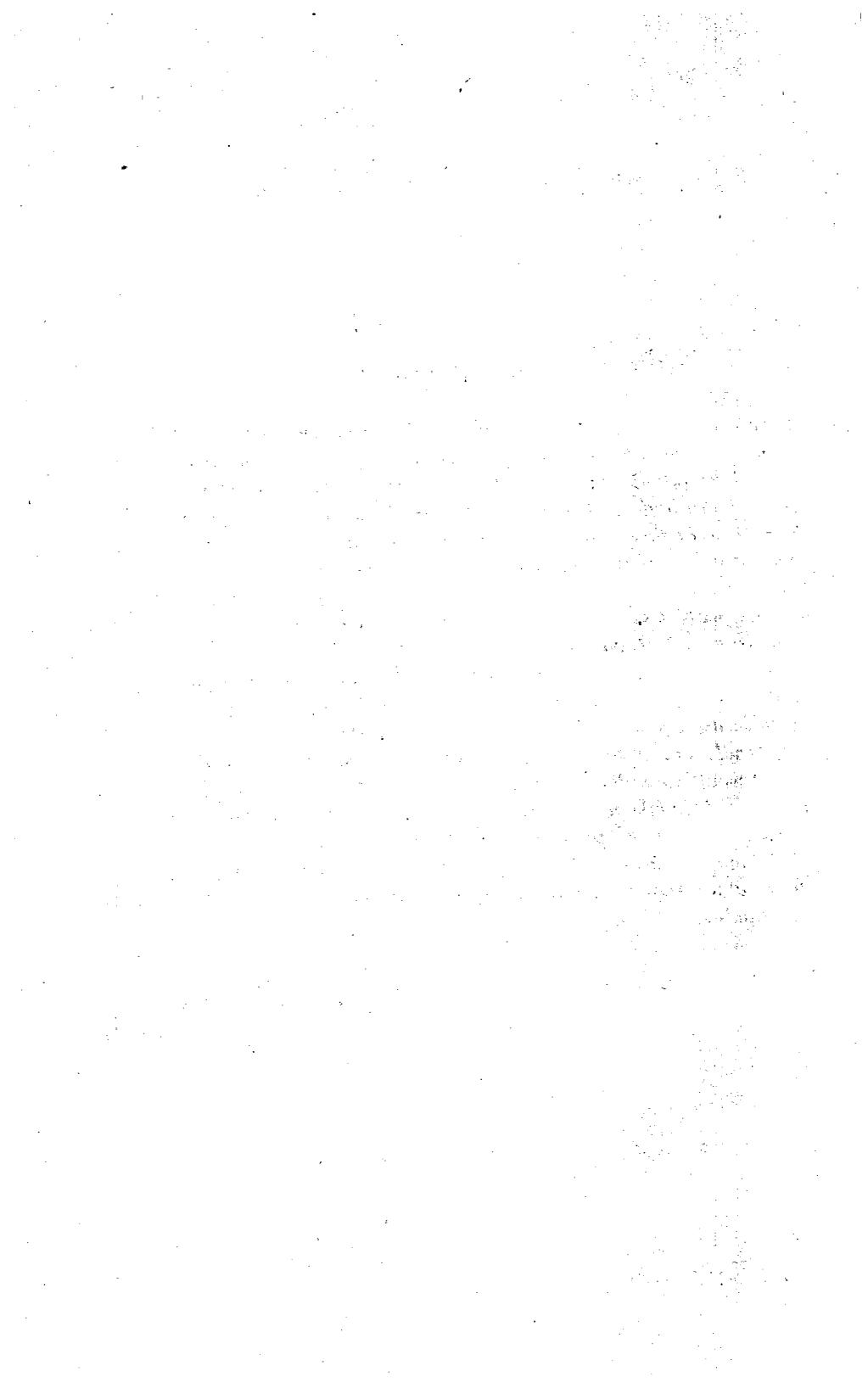
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the preparation of this monograph I have had the benefit of all manner of generous assistance from various members of the Department of Religious Studies. I do, first of all, wish to express my sense of gratitude to Professor L.M. Joshi for his diligent help in the course of this project. Specifically, he has provided me with some of the more relevant insights into the religious literature that I was examining. By going through the manuscript twice before it took its present shape, he has certainly relieved it of several of its awkwardnesses. I am also thankful to Professor Taran Singh for his personal encouragement in my work; but for that, it would not have been possible to intellectually sustain myself through the writing of its more difficult portions. At various stages Dr. Wazir Singh too very kindly spared his time to give me many valuable suggestions.

I would be failing in my duty and propriety if I did not express my heartfelt thanks to Miss Anthea Guinness for revising the whole manuscript from the point of view of language and style.

Finally, I acknowledge with respect and gratefulness the constant advice that Professor Harbans Singh has given me in this undertaking.

DARSHAN SINGH



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INTRODUCTION

In Medieval India, it was occasionally possible for both the Hindus and the Muslims to pay respect to one and the same saint and claim him to be a representative of their respective communities. But it was almost impossible for a *brāhmaṇa* by caste to bow before a *śūdra*. In this respect Ravidāsa was an unusual religious figure. In Brāhmaṇical Hindu estimation, he belonged to the lowest caste, that of a *śūdra*, but by virtue of his spiritual attainments, he rose to the high status of a *bhakta* or saint, and the high caste *brāhmaṇas* not only came to pay him homage, but also acknowledged him as a great religious teacher.

It is perhaps on account of the lack of interest on the part of the *brāhmaṇas*—the custodians of traditional learning—that little scholarly attention has been paid to Ravidāsa. His caste and his spiritual attainments pose a sort of contradiction to traditional Hindus. The traditional Brāhmaṇical institution of *varṇadharma* based upon birth (*jāti*) has obstructed appreciation of the life and work of this saint. Even then attempts have been made to provide a high Brāhmaṇical ancestry for Rāvidasa in his previous life if not in this one. He is said to have had the sacred thread under his skin, although it was missing on his body. Thus he was sought to be Brāhmaṇized.

The *śūdras*, on the other hand, identify Ravidāsa with their caste to the extent that they prefer themselves to be called “Ravidāsiās”, as a distinct caste. Almost all the important *śūdra-gotras* (sub-castes among the *śūdras*) try to trace their own ancestry to Ravidāsa in their traditional accounts of him. There is also a *pantha* (sect) founded in the name of this spiritual teacher. But his reputation travelled far beyond the confines of this *pantha*. Ravidāsa is regarded as a messiah of the traditionally oppressed class of

śūdras. It is through his name that *śūdras* in the medieval centuries sought their religious freedom and social emancipation.

Because of such unusual situation of Ravidāsa, he has not been studied appropriately as a *bhakta* (or a *santa*). First of all, Ravidasa is a *santa* (a saint and devotee of God). Caste has no relevance in the make-up of a *santa*. He transcends such barriers. However, caste is mentioned in this case, not to assert its value, but to show its irrelevance. Ravidāsa himself has repeatedly made references to his caste, but the purpose behind these expressions seems to be not to advocate the *varnadharma* but to show its futility and irrelevance. Ravidāsa nowhere claims that he was a *brāhmaṇa* in his previous life. He tells us the fact that, although his profession is to dress and cut the leather and to remove carcasses, the "brāhmaṇas of good conduct" came to offer their respects to him. In spite of this, some over-zealous defenders of *varnadharma* use such expressions of Ravidāsa to support their contention that he is a staunch believer in the *varnadharma*.

The aim of the present study is to portray Ravidāsa as a *bhakta*. A *bhakta* claims to be neither a Muslim nor a Hindu; neither a *śūdra* nor a *brāhmaṇa*. He does not care for traditional social sanctions, nor does he impose upon himself the limitations of scholasticism. He is only attuned to God, in loving devotion.

The treatment of the subject is divided into four parts. The first part relates to the study of source material on Ravidāsa. The source material, however, is restricted to the available literature on Ravidāsa, which is not much in quantity; still fewer are the works devoted exclusively to him. The earliest literature on Ravidāsa is in the form of scattered references in the works of other saints, or in the works generally concerned with the medieval Indian saints.

According to time sequence, these sources may be classified as traditional and modern. The traditional works are those written in the mythical idiom and in the traditional literary forms in Hindi and Punjabi languages, mostly in the form of poetry. The modern works are mostly critical studies relating to the life and thought of Ravidāsa. The traditional literature was produced by sectarian writers, who presented Ravidāsa according to their own sectarian points

of view. Modern works are supposed to be impartial accounts, but as a cursory study of these works reveals, they are not entirely free from sectarian and ideological biases.

Our purpose here is not to establish or demolish one approach or the other but to straightway present the results of our own study of the *santa*. In this study we have been greatly benefited from all the earlier works. For convenience of our study, we have further divided the literature into two categories, viz. the primary sources and the secondary sources. In the category of primary sources all the works attributed to Ravidāsa are included. All the remaining works are put in the category of secondary sources.

In our present survey of the source materials an attempt is made to discuss almost all the available references at one place. In the case of some important earlier accounts of Ravidāsa, a summary of the accounts of the *santa* and an introduction to the works and their authors have also been given. The survey may not be a comprehensive one but it is certainly a close look at the sources, and may be of some benefit to those interested in further study of Ravidāsa.

In the second chapter, an attempt is made to reconstruct his biography on the basis of source materials discussed in the first chapter. In all these early works, emphasis is placed on describing the religious merits of Ravidāsa, rather than on his life history. Despite the limited biographical information available, we have attempted to construct an outline of his life. Regarding this reconstruction it may be admitted that we have not been able to say a final word on any aspect of his life. We have stated in our account what the available sources seem to suggest. For instance, one specific problem regarding the life of Ravidāsa is his relation with Mīrābāī, a Rājput princess and worshipper of *saguna* God (possessing qualities; manifested). She is said to have been initiated into spiritual life by Ravidāsa, who himself was devotee of *nirguna* God (without qualities; unconditioned). Is it possible for a worshipper of *saguna* God to adopt a *gurū* (preceptor) from among the *nirguna* santas? If this is not possible, how is it that the tradition of Tulasīdāsa and Sūradāsa (*saguna* saints) is traced back to

Rāmānanda who initiates Kabīra and Ravidāsa the saints of *nirguna* tradition? Some of the early works in Hindi as well as in Punjabi, and the compositions of Mīrābāi herself maintain that she is initiated by Ravidāsa. We have not been able to solve this problem with any finality, but have accepted it as found in the traditional works, to be probed further. In other similar cases, too, we have avoided imposing our own convictions, especially where further research is necessary.

The third chapter is devoted to the study of the development and transformation of the bhakti movement from the early eighth century to the fourteenth century, up to the emergence of the *nirguna* school of North India. Ravidāsa as mentioned earlier is primarily a *bhakta*, who does not seem to subscribe to any specific school of bhakti evolved earlier. But if there is any closeness of his own belief-system (theology) to another one, it is to the ever-flowing stream of the bhakti movement itself. In its historical development, the movement of bhakti has undergone great changes. The reasons for these changes of course were the religious, social and political conditions. Every new milieu has lent its own colour to the movement.

There have been attempts to systematize the doctrine of bhakti. But before one system completes itself, the course of bhakti enters into a new phase. It always eludes systematization. However, if there is any context in which the contributions of Bhakta Ravidāsa can be evaluated, it is the context of bhakti. This chapter therefore provides a background against which Bhakta Ravidāsa's belief system can be studied, and his contributions appreciated.

The Fourth chapter, entitled the "Religious Beliefs of Bhakta Ravidāsa" is an attempt to reconstruct the belief-system underlying the devotional hymns of Ravidāsa. Only a *bhakta* can know the depth of a *bhakta*; it is far beyond the reach of an ordinary student. Any attempt at systematizing the belief-system found in the vision of a mystic will belittle it. In our study of the religious beliefs of Bhakta Ravidāsa, we have tried to be faithful to the texts available. We have collected whatever we could and have tried to present it in a coherent order with a view to formulating his

theology. Instead of saying much of our own or taking support from the already evolved doctrines of bhakti, we have relied heavily on the text, for the simple reason that, where we stray away from the truth, the text may correct us. There are several English translations of the hymns of Ravidāsa found in the Sikh's holy scripture the Gurūgrantha. Scholars generally agree that, of all these translations Mr. M.A. Macauliffe's translation, is the best. We have therefore quoted from Macauliffe's translation also giving the page numbers of Gurūgrantha Sāhib for easy reference. We have also added notes where we differ from Macauliffe's interpretation. The translations of the hymns not included in the Gurūgrantha are our own, and with such translations we have retained the original as well.

In the present monograph, an attempt has been made to interpret whatever sources are presently available. It is hoped that some new sources will soon come to light as a number of academic institutions and individual scholars are actively engaged in search for new materials on Ravidāsa. New sources certainly would add to our knowledge of the saint. In the meantime, it is hoped the present attempt would be of some interest to scholars and laymen interested in the life and work of Ravidāsa.



CHAPTER I

SOURCES ON LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF BHAKTA RAVIDĀSA

The Nature of the Sources

Before we make a survey of the source material on the life and teachings of Bhakta Ravidāsa it would be appropriate to make some observations regarding the general nature of the literary sources available for the study. In the literature the historical details of the life of Bhakta Ravidāsa, as in the case of other contemporary saints also, are shrouded in obscurity. The absence of such details is not due to the fact that these saints could not attract sufficient attention from the people, rather they were given the due respect by their contemporaries and later generations as well. The reason for the absence of such details may be traced back to the religio-philosophic culture of the people in this part of the world.

From time immemorial the most important thing about India has been her spiritual life. Worldly ideals and values are never given preference over those of the spirit. Human life on the whole is always considered instrumental to the higher spiritual ends of life. The worldly life is never considered to be an end in itself. All the *māyā*-oriented (material) pursuits are supposed to bring destruction of that which is good and worth preserving in man. The goal of *artha* (worldly gains) in comparison to *mokṣa* (liberation) has always received a secondary place in the Indian scheme of life. Religious merits are always a measure of the true greatness of a person. The most respected strivings in Indian life are those devoted to religious aims.

The present life, according to the Indian view, is but one in a series of lives. It is inseparably related to the past and the future. The present life is the result of the *karmas* of the past, and the future life would be determined from our *karmas* in this life. Man's final release consists in liberating one's soul from *samsāra* (cycle of birth and death). The historical details of the mortal life, therefore, are far less important in comparison to the details of the religious strivings. If there is anything worth recording in this life it is the attainment of spiritual values. The tradition of historiography, therefore, was almost non-existent in India. How could one be interested in recording and preserving that which is perceived as *mithyā* (false and unreal).

The small quantity of available literature that is produced during these centuries is written from the idealistic point of view, to make the people's life ideal. The literary portraits of these times are intended to inspire the common man to the higher values of life. In this literature we do not find descriptions of the day-to-day life of saints. Only those aspects of the lives of the saints are recorded which would be of some use in the realization of spiritual goals. The so-called hagiographers of this period do not see anything wrong in employing the already existing legendary material to embellish their own accounts. For example, in the accounts of many saints, we find similar miraculous stories relating to their birth and death. The legends are intentionally woven around these historical figures. The secondary purpose of these legendary writings seems to give expression to what otherwise remains inexpressible in the lives of these mystic saints, but the primary purpose of making the accounts more exemplary and inspiring is important.

Another important genre of literature in this period is the lyrical hymns composed by the mystics themselves, expressing their religious feelings and beliefs. In these hymns we find isolated historical references relating to the personal life of the saint and to the saints of contemporary and earlier periods.

These references may be considered the most authoritative first-hand information about their lives. But in these compositions also the humble saints, in their humility always try to conceal those details of their life, which may reflect their higher spiritual status. These sources, therefore, can fruitfully be employed keeping their nature and aims in mind.

Having made these few comments on the nature and the aims of the literature of these periods, we may turn to the study of available material on the life and teachings of Bhakta Ravidāsa. For the convenience of our study we can divide all the sources into two broad categories, primary and secondary sources. In the first category are the compositions attributed to Bhakta Ravidāsa himself; in the second category, all the contemporary and near contemporary literary sources shedding light on the life and mission of the saint.

Primary Sources

Ravidāsa was a great mystic saint—a bhakta. In his divine ecstasy he composed many hymns full of devotional fervour and intense love for God. We do not know for certain whether or not Ravidāsa had any traditional schooling. We have not been able to trace any manuscript copy of his hymns written in his own hand and it seems likely that he himself did not write down his compositions. He used to recite his hymns among his followers at the time of congregation. It seems that the verses which have come down to us were recorded by his followers from memory, after his passing away. The variations existing among different manuscripts are sufficient to prove that these were not copied down from any authentic source.

The earliest manuscript copy of his hymns is of Vikrama Samvata 1646 (1589 A.D.) entitled *Ravidāsa Ke Pada*, which according to the Report of 1941 is in the possession of Bābā Haridāsa of Aligarh.¹ Another manuscript copy of his hymns entitled *Ravidāsa Kā Pada* of Vikrama Samvata 1709 (1652 A.D.) is preserved in the State Library of Jodhpura. Other manuscript copies of his hymns are *Ravidāsa Ki Bāni* of

1. *Report* (Kaśi Nāgari Pracārani Sabhā No. 2341, 1941), p. 1905

Vikrama Samvata 1855 (1798 A.D.). The authorship of *Prahlāda Līlā*, a composition of considerable length dealing with the main incidents of the life of Prahlāda is also attributed to Ravidāsa. A manuscript copy of this text of Vikrama Samvata 1986 (1929 A.D.) is available with Rāmchandra Sainī, Belza Ganj, Agra.² Some of his hymns are also found in the *Sarbāṅgi* and the *Panchbāṇi/Pancabāṇi*, the scriptures of the Dādūpantha. In the *Gurūgranthasāhib*, the holy book of the Sikhs, we find forty hymns and a couplet attributed to Ravidāsa. The hymns incorporated in this holy volume are, perhaps, the earliest record of his compositions available.

In recent years some scholars have arranged the publication of all these available hymns of Bhakta Ravidāsa. These publications are, at best, the anthologies of the hymns attributed to him in the above noted manuscripts, without being critically edited. The first attempt in publishing his hymns was made by the editor (name not given) of *Raidāsa Jī Kī Bāñi*. This small booklet was published in 1908 A.D. by the Belvedere Press, Allahabad. It consists of 87 *padas* (hymns) and 6 *sākhīs* (couplets). The second important work in this direction is by Rāmānanda Sāstri and Virendra Pāndey.³ These two devoted scholars have consulted almost all the available literary sources on Ravidāsa. Theirs is the first scholarly attempt in the study of Ravidāsa. Apart from collecting all the available verses of Ravidāsa, they have also collected some legendary and historical information regarding the saint. This book consists of 97 *padas* and 6 *sākhīs* and the *Prahlāda Līlā*. Sangam Lal Pandey has also written a small book called *Santa Ravidāsa*,⁴ the second part of his book includes 106 *padas* and 7 *sākhīs* attributed to Ravidāsa. Joginder Singh in his scholarly work *Santa Raidāsa*⁵ has added some more hymns to the above list. His book includes 112 *padas*, 8 *sākhīs* and

2. *Ibid.*

3. Svāmi Rāmānanda Sāstri and Virendra Pāndey, *Santa Ravidāsa Aur Unkā Kāvya* (Lucknow, Navabhārata Press, 1956).

4. Sangam Lal Pandey, *Santa Ravidāsa* (Allahabad, Darśana Peetha, 1968).

5. Joginder Singh, *Santa Raidāsa* (New Delhi, Akṣara Prakāśan, 1972).

Prahļāda Carita. Acārya Prithvī Singh Azāda has compiled more than 190 *sākhīs* attributed to Ravidāsa in his work *Ravidāsa Darśana*.⁶ His effort is praiseworthy, but the authenticity of these verses is yet to be established. The arguments advanced by the author are not convincing. Moreover, these verses differ from the other hymns in style, language, and content. They seem to be the work of some twentieth century poet of ordinary merits.

In all these collections of Ravidāsa's compositions, most of the lines are common. We are purposely using here the term 'lines' instead of 'hymns' for in the common hymns the number of lines varies. In some cases the lines of one hymn are found in some other hymn. The presence of different words conveying different meanings in the same hymn in different collections is a characteristic feature. In different anthologies, the number of common hymns also varies.

Now the question arises as to why there are variations in these collections and which of these collections is to be accepted as most authentic. The question regarding the authenticity of his hymns is yet to be solved; in fact it has only just begun to be studied. However, regarding the hymns incorporated in the *Gurūgranthasāhib*, the scholars are unanimous that these hymns are the earliest of all the hymns and they are well preserved against the dangers of interpolation⁷.

The *Gurūgranthasāhib* was compiled and edited by Gurū Arjana Deva, the fifth gurū in the line of Gurū Nānak, whose merits as the greatest authority on medieval religious literature are beyond any doubt. The *Gurūgranthasāhib* was compiled in 1604 A.D., but the verses incorporated in it were collected considerably earlier. Before the compilation of the *Grantha*, these verses were preserved in the form of *pothīs* (books), known as the "*Pothīs of Bābā Mohana*" because they were in

6. Prithvī Singh Azāda, *Ravidāsa Darśana* (Chandigarh, Shri Gurū Ravidāsa Sampthāna, 1973).

7. Rāmānanda sāstri and Virendra Pandey, op. cit., p. 91; Parashu Rāma Caturvedi, *Uttarī Bhārata Kī Santa Paramparā* (Allahabad, Leader Press, Samvata 2021), p. 244; Bhagavata Brat Misra, *Santa Raidāsa and His Panth* (unpublished Ph. D. thesis): Tagore Library, Lucknow, R. H. 891, 4308, B 52, 1954, p. 156.

his possession at the time of the compilation. Gurū Arjana borrowed these *pothīs* from Bābā Mohana for the purpose of their inclusion in the Sikh Scripture.

It seems that collections of the verses by *bhaktas* and others was begun by Gurū Nānak. The compositions of the *bhaktas* were definitely known to Gurū Nānak (1469-1538).⁸ During his extensive journeys to all directions of the country, the Gurū met almost all the reputed saints of his time. He had discourses with them on religious issues. It is maintained in the *Janama-Sākhī* by Sodhī Meharvāna (1581-1640) that Mardānā the rebeck player and life-long companion of Gurū Nānak used to sing the hymns of Bhakta Ravidāsa and other *bhaktas*.⁹ The author further informs us that during the Gurū's visit to Ayodhyā, the saints of that area, including Ravidāsa, came to see him.¹⁰ From such references it seems quite probable that Gurū Nānak himself had collected the hymns of the *bhaktas* and they were then incorporated into the Holy Grantha by Gurū Arjana Deva. The authenticity of these hymns, therefore, is accepted by all scholars. But regarding the authenticity of other collections, we cannot say anything with certainty unless we have strong evidence establishing their authenticity. It may be stated here that in our study of the saint we have accepted the hymns included in the *Gurūgranthasāhib* as the earliest and most reliable original source. Other works have also been employed, only to the extent that their basic spirit does not go against the spirit of the authentic hymns of Ravidāsa as far as his religious beliefs are concerned.

In these hymns the references to the personal life of the saint are few. All that we learn from his verses regarding his

8. Sahib Singh *Adi Beerh Bāre* (Amritsar, Singh Brothers, 1970), pp. 85-108.
9. Sodhī Meharvāna, *Pothī Sacū Khanda: Janamasākhī Sri Gurū Nānak Deva Ji*, vol.I (Amritsar, Khalsa College), p. 73.
(ਮਰਦਾਨਾ ਝੂਮ ਕਲਾਲਾਂ ਕਾ ਤਲਵੰਡੀ ਰਾਇ ਭੋਖੇ ਕੀ ਰਹਦਾ, ਰਥਾਘ ਵਜਾਇਦਾ, ਨਾਮ ਕੰਬੀਰ, ਤਿਲੋਚਨ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ
ਪਲੇ ਬੇਣੀ ਦੇ ਪਦੇ ਗਾਵਤਾ। ਗੁਰੂ ਬਾਬੇ ਨਾਨਕ ਕੈ ਆਗੈ ਪਦੇ ਗਾਵਤਾ।)
10. Kirpal Singh, *Janam Sākhī Paramparā* (Patiala, Punjabi University, 1969), Appendix, pp 110-11.

life is that of his birth in a low *carmakāra*, popularly called *camāra*, (cobbler) caste;¹¹ of his hard and humiliating early life, a laughing stock for the higher *varṇas*;¹² of his socially inferior profession, of mending shoes,¹³ of his place of birth,¹⁴ of his spiritually and socially exalted later life when even the *brāhmaṇas* of good conduct would come to him to pay their homage.¹⁵ In his verses we also find references to earlier and contemporary saints. Ravidāsa has mentioned Nāmadeva, Kabīra Trilochana, Sadhnā and Saiṇa with great regard. According to Ravidāsa, all of these saints were liberated souls.¹⁶ Referring to Kabīra, Ravidāsa says that he has risen to great spiritual heights and become renowned in all the three worlds.¹⁷ His references to other saints can be of great help in

11. ਮੇਰੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਕਮੀਨੀ ਪਾਤਿ ਕਮੀਨੀ ਓਛਾ ਜਨਮੁ ਹਮਾਰਾ ॥
ਨਾਗਰ ਜਨਾ ਮੇਰੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਬਿਖਿਆਤ ਚੰਮਾਰੰ ॥
ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਸੇਰਠਿ, ਰਵਿਦਾਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 659

12. ਦਾਰਿਦ੍ਰ ਦੇਖਿ ਸਭ ਕੇ ਹੈਸੈ, ਐਸੀ ਦਸਾ ਹਮਾਰੀ ॥
ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਮਲਾਰ, ਰਵਿਦਾਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 1293

13. ਚਮਰਟਾ ਗਾਠਿ ਨ ਜਨਈ ਲੋਗੁ ਗਠਾਵੈ ਪਨਹੀ ॥
ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਬਿਲਾਵਲ, ਰਵਿਦਾਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 858
ਤੈਦਾਸ ਤੂ ਕਾਂਵਚ ਫਲੀ ਤੁਝੇ ਨ ਛੀਪੈ ਕੋਇ ॥
ਤੈਦਾਸ ਕੀ ਬਾਣੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 1

14. (ਉ) ਮੇਰੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਕੁਟਬਾਚਲਾ ਫੇਰ ਛੋਵੰਤਾ ਨਿਤਹਿ ਬਾਨਾਰਸੀ ਆਸ ਪਾਸ ॥
ਮੇਰੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਕੁਟਬਾਚਲਾ ਫੇਰ ਛੋਵੰਤਾ ਨਿਤਹਿ ਬਾਨਾਰਸੀ ਆਸ ਪਾਸ ॥
ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਮਲਾਰ, ਰਵਿਦਾਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 1293

15. (ਉ) ਅਥ ਬਿਪੁ ਪਰਧਾਨ ਤਿਹਿ ਕਰਹਿ ਡੰਡਉਤਿ ਤੇਰੇ ਨਾਮ ਸਰਣਾਇ ਰਵਿਦਾਸੁ ਦਾਸ ॥
(ਅ) ਜਾਕੇ ਕੁਟੰਬ ਕੇ ਢੇਢ ਸਭ ਢੇਰ ਛੋਵੰਤ ਵਿਰਹਿ ਅਜਹੁ ਬੰਨਾਰਸੀ ਆਸ ਪਾਸ ॥
(ਅ) ਅਚਾਰ ਸਹਿਤ ਬਿਪੁ ਕਰਹਿ ਡੰਡਉਤਿ ਤਿਨ ਤਨੈ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਦਾਸਾਨ ਦਾਸ ॥
(ਅ) ਅਚਾਰ ਸਹਿਤ ਬਿਪੁ ਕਰਹਿ ਡੰਡਉਤਿ ਤਿਨ ਤਨੈ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਦਾਸਾਨ ਦਾਸ ॥
(ਅ) ਗਰੀਬ ਨਿਵਾਜੁ ਗੁਸਈਆ ਮੇਰਾ ਮਾਵੈ ਛੜ੍ਹ ਧਰੈ ॥
ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਮਲਾਰ, ਰਵਿਦਾਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 1293
ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਮਲਾਰ, ਰਵਿਦਾਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 1293
ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਮਲਾਰ, ਰਵਿਦਾਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 1293
ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਮਾਰੂ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 1106

16. (ਉ) ਨਾਮਦੇਵ ਕਬੀਰ ਤਿਲੋਚਨ ਸਧਨਾ ਸੈਨ ਤਾਰੈ ॥
(ਅ) ਹਰਿ ਕੇ ਨਾਮ ਕਬੀਰ ਉਜਾਗਰ ॥ ਜਨਮ ਜਨਮ ਕੇ ਕਾਟੇ ਕਾਗਰ ॥
ਨਿਮਤ ਨਾਮਦੇਉ ਦੁਧੁ ਪੀਅਇਆ ॥ ਤਉ ਜਗ ਜਨਮ ਸੰਕਟ ਨਹੀ ਆਇਆ ॥
ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਆਸਾ, ਰਵਿਦਾਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 487

17. ਤਿਹੁ ਰੇ ਲੋਕ ਪਰਸਿਧ ਕਬੀਰਾ ॥
ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਮਲਾਰ, ਰਵਿਦਾਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 1293

determining his time in relation to these saints; and although the references to his personal life are very few, their importance is far greater than their small number would indicate, both in terms of reconstructing his life story as well as his belief-system.

Secondary Sources

Ravidāsa came to be regarded as a great religious teacher even during his own lifetime. Some of his contemporary saints proclaim him to be a great saint in their devotional verses. The authors of all the legendary and semi-legendary accounts of the religious leaders in later medieval periods provide gratuitously a respectable place to Ravidāsa in their writings. In this section on secondary sources, we shall make a brief survey of such references as are devoted to the great saint. These references, though of legendary nature, are of great importance in any reconstruction of the life and religious beliefs of the saint. They can fruitfully be employed by making a comparative study of different details. In the ensuing survey we have attempted to give a summary of all the references to Ravidāsa in these works. In some important cases a brief introduction to the author and his work has also been added.

Of all the secondary sources the hymns of the saints contemporary with Ravidāsa are the earliest records of his life and doings. Bhakta Kabīra most probably was a contemporary of Ravidāsa. Both the saints flourished in the same geographical region. As we have noted earlier Ravidāsa expressed in his hymns his great admiration for Bhakta Kabīra. Kabīra also cherishes the same regards for the saintliness and spiritual perfection of Bhakta Ravidāsa :

It is but folly to ask what the caste of a saint may be;
 The barber has sought God, the washerwoman, and the carpenter.
 Even Raidāso was a seeker after God. The *rishi* Svapacha was a
 tanner by caste. Hindus and Moslems alike have achieved that end,
 where remains no mark of distinction.¹⁸

18. Rabindranath Tagore, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (London, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 2.

At another place Kabīra places Ravidāsa among those great saints who have tasted the nectar of divine Truth :

Do not follow the mirage on foot,
but thirst for the nectar;
Dhruva, Prahlād, and Shukadeva have drunk of
it and also Raidāsa has tasted it.¹⁹

Mīrābāī, the great woman saint of the royal family of Cittor, most probably was disciple of Ravidāsa. In the hymns attributed to Mīrābāī it is repeatedly affirmed that she was initiated into the spiritual life by Ravidāsa of Kāśī.²⁰

Other earlier saints who make mention of Ravidāsa in their hymns and have proclaimed him to be a great devotee of God are Gurū Rāmadāsa (1574-1581)²¹, the fourth in the line of the Sikh Gurūs, Gurū Arjana Deva (1581-1606), the fifth Nānak,²²

19. *Ibid.*, 65.

20. 1. ਕਾਸੀ ਨਗਰਨਾ ਚੋਕਮਾ ਮਨੇ ਗੁਰੂ ਮਿਲਾ ਰੈਦਾਸ ॥
2. ਵਾਚਾਣਸੀ ਕੇ ਘਾਟ ਪੈ ਫਿਰ ਗੁਰੂ ਮਿਲਿਆ ਰੈਦਾਸ ॥
3. ਮੀਰਾ ਨੇ ਗੋਵਿੰਦ ਮਿਲਾ ਜੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਮਿਲਿਆ ਰੈਦਾਸ ॥
4. ਮਹਾਰੇ ਗੁਰੂ ਰੈਦਾਸ ਹੈ ਸਜਨੀ ਮਹਾਰੀ ਰੇ ॥
5. ਰੈਦਾਸ ਸੰਤ ਮਿਲੇ ਮੇਹਿ ਸਤਗੁਰੂ ਦੀਨਾ ਸਰਤ ਸਹਦਾਨੀ ॥
6. ਗੁਰੂ ਮਿਲਿਆ ਰੈਦਾਸ ਜੀ ਦੀਨਵੀ ਗਿਆਨ ਕੀ ਗੁਟਕੀ ॥
7. ਗੁਰੂ ਰੈਦਾਸ ਮਿਲੇ ਮੇਹਿ ਪੂਰੇ ਪੁਰ ਸੇ ਕਲਮ ਭਿੜੀ ॥

I have quoted these verses from Prabhāta's book *Mīrā Bāī* published by Hindi Grantha Ratnākara Pvt. Ltd., Bombay, 1965, p. 170. It may be mentioned here that there is a controversy regarding the authenticity of such verses, but they exist in almost all the earlier available manuscripts of her hymns.

21. ਰਵਿਦਾਸੁ ਚਮਾਰੁ ਉਸਤਤਿ ਕਰੇ ਹਰਿ ਕੀਰਤਿ ਲਿਮਾ ਇਕ ਗਾਇ ॥
ਪਤਿਤ ਜਾਤਿ ਉਤਸੁ ਭਇਆ ਚਾਰਿ ਵਰਣ ਪਏ ਪਾਗਿ ਆਇ ॥ 2॥

ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਸੂਹੀ, ਮਹਲਾ, ੪, ਪੰ. ੨੩੩

22. ਰਵਿਦਾਸੁ ਛਵੰਤਾ ਢੋਰ ਨੀਤਿ ਤਿਨ੍ਹਿ ਤਿਆਗੀ ਮਾਇਆ ॥
ਪਰਗਟ ਹੋਆ ਸਧ ਸੰਗ ਹਰਿ ਦਰਸਨੁ ਪਾਇਆ ॥

ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਆਸਾ ਮਹਲਾ, ੫, ਪੰ. ੪੬੭

N.B. Some scholars have attributed the authorship of this hymn to Bhakta Dhannā. But the title of the hymn clearly indicates that it is the hymn of Gurū Arjana. The cause of the mistake may be the placing of this hymn between two hymns of Bhakta Dhannā. But in the *Gurūgranthasāhib* this is not exceptional. At other places also the hymns of the Gurūs are found placed among the hymns of the *bhaktas*.

Bhāi Gurdāsa,²³ the scribe of *Gurūgranthasāhib*; Kala Sahāra,²⁴ the bard in the court of the Sikh Gurūs, and Rajaba,²⁵ a disciple of Saint Dādū, propounder of the Dādū Pantha.

In the above mentioned references, it is often maintained that Ravidāsa was born in a cobbler family. His profession was that of mending shoes and removing dead cattles. By his intense devotion, he realized God and his fame as a great saint travelled in all the four directions. He became the teacher not only of the low caste people, but of all the four *varṇas* (castes). Rajaba made the God-realization of Ravidāsa a standard to measure the depth of the realization of other saints.²⁶

Kabīra-Raidāsa Sambāda

The authorship of *Kabīra Raidāsa Sambāda*, a supposed dialogue between Kabīra and Ravidāsa is attributed to Saini Nāi, a disciple of Rāmānanda.²⁷ The dialogue perhaps was written in 1545 A.D. Saini was in the service of Rājā Bīr

23. ਭਗਤੁ ਭਗਤੁ ਜਗਿ ਵਸਿਆ ਚਹੁੰ ਚਕਾ ਦੇ ਵਿਚਿ ਚਮਿਲੇਟਾ ॥
 ਪਾਹੁ ਗਹੈ ਰਾਹ ਵਿਚਿ ਕੁਲਾ ਧਰਮ ਢੇਇ ਢੇਰ ਸਮੇਟਾ ॥
 ਜਿਉ ਕਰਿ ਮੈਲੇ ਚੀਖੈ ਹੀਗਾ ਲਾਲ ਅਮੇਲੁ ਪਲੇਟਾ ॥
 ਚਹੁੰ ਵਰਨਾ ਉਪਦੇਸਦਾ ਗਿਆਨ ਪਿਆਨੁ ਕਰਿ ਭਗਤਿ ਸਹੇਟਾ ॥
 ਨੁਹਣਿ ਆਇਆ ਸੰਗੁ ਮਿਲਿ ਬਾਨਰਸ ਕਰਿ ਰੰਗਾ ਬੇਟਾ ॥
 ਕਵਿ ਕਸੀਰਾ ਸਉਪਿਆ ਰਵਿਦਾਸੈ ਰੰਗਾ ਦੀ ਭੇਟਾ ॥
 ਲੱਗਾ ਪੁਰਬੁ ਅਭੀਚ ਦਾ ਡਿਠਾ ਚਲਿਤੁ ਅਚਰਜ ਅਮੇਟਾ ॥
 ਲਇਆ ਕਸੀਰਾ ਹਹਿ ਕਵਿ ਸੂਤੁ ਇਕੁ ਜਿਉ ਤਾਣਾ ਪੇਟਾ ॥
 ਭਗਤ ਜਨਾ ਹਰਿ ਮਾ ਪਿਉ ਬੇਟਾ ॥ 17 ॥

ਵਾਰਂ ਭਾਈ ਗੁਰਦਾਸ, ਅਮ੍ਰਿਤਸਰ, ਖਾਲਸਾ ਸਮਾਚਾਰ, 1962, ਪੰਨਾ 177.

24. ਗੁਣ ਗਾਵੈ ਰਵਿਦਾਸੁ ਭਗਤੁ ਜੈਏਵ ਤ੍ਰਿਲੋਚਨ ॥
 ਨਾਮਾ ਭਗਤ ਕਬੀਰੁ ਸਦਾ ਗਾਵਹਿ ਸਮਲੋਚਨ ॥

ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਕਾਲ ਸਹਾਰ, ਪੰਨਾ 1390

25. ਚਮਾਰੀ ਗੇਮ ਉਤਪਨੇ ਰੈਦਾਸੀ ਮਹਾਮੁਨੀ ਉਤਯਮ ਬੁਹਮ ਸੁਮਿਰਿਨਮ ਨਾਮ, ਤਸਮਾਹ ਕਯਾ ਜਾਤਿ ਕਾਰਣ ਸਨੇ ॥

Rajaba, *Sarbhāngi*, *op.cit*

26. "Jaydeva had encountered with the Primal Reality like Ravidasa". Rajaba as quoted by Sangam Lal Pandey, *Existence, Devotion and Freedom* (Allahabad Darśanapeeth, 1965), p. 19.

27. R. D. Ranade, *Mysticism in Maharashtra*, Poona, p. 190; Sangam Lal Pandey, *op. cit*, pp. 130-37, maintains that Saini Nāi is not the same person who is a disciple of Rāmānanda. The author of this dialogue, according to Pandey, seems to be a disciple of Kabīra. He has not done justice to Ravidāsa, who has been made a disciple of Kabīra.

Singh of the Badhelā family Bāndhavagarh. According to the author Kabīra and Raidāsa both are disciples of Rāmānanda. Kabīr belongs to the first category of his disciples whereas Ravidāsa belongs to the third category. The outline of the dialogue is as follows :

Jhāli, the Queen of Cittor, comes to Kāśī on a pilgrimage. During her visit, Kabīra and Ravidāsa are staying there. Kabīra is leading a poor but simple life; Ravidāsa in spite of his humble birth, is leading a rich and comfortable life. The queen visits both of these saints. Much impressed by Ravidāsa, she becomes his disciple. When the *brāhmaṇas* learn of her initiation by Ravidāsa they feel indignant. They complain of it to the King of Badhelā. The king comes to Kāśī accompanied by Saini Nāi. All the efforts of king to pacify the angry *brāhmaṇas* prove futile. At this Ravidāsa comes to Kabīra for his help. Kabīra comes to the rescue of Ravidāsa against the *brāhmaṇas*. During this meeting the two saints have a dialogue on the nature of God. Kabīra advances the *nirguna* theory of God wheras Ravidāsa supports the *saguna* theory. The dialogue concludes with Ravidāsa being convinced of the theory of *nirguna* God. Saini, who was present at the meeting, professes Ravidāsa as his spiritual teacher. Later on Saini wrote down this dialogue between the two great saints to which he was a witness.

The dialogue, according to the claims of its author, is a contemporary and authentic work. It can be of great importance in understanding the religious beliefs of Ravidāsa. Ravidāsa as we learn from this dialogue is a contemporary of Kabīra. Earlier he is a believer in *saguna* God but later on, he switches over his devotion to *nirguna* God.

We also have a Punjābi version of the dialogue preserved in the Sikh Reference Library, Amritsar (Ms. No. 1973). It also deals with the same controversy of *nirguna* and *saguna* notions of God. The date of composition and name of the author of this dialogue is not given. The composition is of considerable length running to seventy one stanzas.

The Bhaktamāla

The author of this well-known text is Nābhādāsa; who was born in the state of Gwālior. His earlier name was Naraindāsa.²⁸ Traditionally his geneology is traced to Hanumāna (the monkey-god) perhaps with a view to conceal his humble birth.²⁹ He was born blind, and his father passed away when he was just a child. When he was five years old there was a great famine in the country. His mother finding it difficult to bring him up, deserted him in a forest where he was found by Agradāsa and Kiladeva, two Hindu pilgrims. Kiladeva sprinkled some water out of his gourd on the eyes of the child at which he regained his sight.³⁰ They took the child along with them in their āśrama (holy retreat) and asked him to wait on the visiting holy men. In this capacity, Nābhādāsa was able to learn the legendary accounts of the saints. Later on at the suggestion of Agradāsa he recorded all these legends in his work *Santa Caritra* which forms the basis of the *Bhaktamāla*.³¹ Agradāsa who brought up the child was a follower of Vallabha but Nābhādāsa was a Rāmānandi³² (follower of Rāmānanda). Rām Kumār Varmā places the date of composition of *Bhaktamāla* as Samvata 1642³³ (1585 A.D.). According to Farquhar this date can be brought to still later period. He says that Nābhādāsa flourished when Girdhāri was the head of the Vallabhas and Tulsī was still alive, i.e. between 1585 and 1623 A.D.³⁴ According to Kedāra Nātha Divedi the time of *Bhaktamāla* is Samvata 1645 (1588 A.D.).³⁵ Consider-

28. M.A. Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, Vol. VI. (Delhi, S. Chand and Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1963, reprint), p.2.

29. K.M. Sen, *Mediaeval Mysticism of India*, (London, Luzac and Co., 1935), p. 77.

30. *Srī Bhaktamāla*, Sri Priya Dāsa Commentary and Swāmī Prapannācharya's translation, (Mathura, Govardhan Pustakālā) p. 9.

31. M.A. Macauliffe, *op cit.*, p. 2.

32. J.N Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, (Delhi, Motilal Banaridas, reprint, 1967). p. 317.

33. Rām Kumār Varmā, *Hindi Sāhitya Kā Alochanātmaka Itihāsa* (Allahabad 1971), p. 17.

34. J. N. Farquhar, *op. cit.*, 317.

35. Kedāra Nātha Divedī, *Sri Hit Dhruva Dāsa Aur Unkā Sāhitya* (Dehradun, Sahitya Sadana, 1971), p.343.

ing all these views the period between Samvata 1642 and 1650 (1585 and 1593 A.D.) seems to be most probable.

The *Bhaktamāla* is a store house of information regarding the medieval Vaiṣṇava saints. The historical facts, however are found mixed with the legends. In the scheme of this text usually one *caupai* (a metre; poetic form written in *caupai* metre) is devoted to each saint. Speaking of the importance of the text, Grierson says that it is a storehouse of legends regarding the saints, ancient and modern, of the Bhāgavata religion. The importance of this book for a just comprehension of the religious attitude of modern Hinduism cannot be overrated. Tulsidās's *Rāmacaritamānasa* and the *Bhaktamāla* are the two textbooks of the modern *Bhāgavata*.³⁶ Nābhādāsa devotes one *caupai* to Ravidāsa of which the following is a free rendering :

The immaculate verses of Raidāsa are capable of cutting the knot of doubt,

His sayings are in accordance with the ethics of the revealed texts. His verses are professed by the people who are like geese which separate water from milk.

By the grace of God he attained liberation in this life.

Sitting on the highest throne of truth, he sets an example of wisdom and faith.

Casting away their pride of *vārṇa* and *āśrama* people come to touch his feet.

The immaculate verses of Raidāsa are capable of cutting the knot of doubt.³⁷

36. George A. Grierson. 'Bhakti Marga' in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, vol. II (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1964). p. 546.

37. ਸੰਦੇਹ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਖੰਡਨ ਨਿਧਨ ਬਾਣੀ ਵਿਮਲ ਰੈਦਾਸ ਕੀ ॥

ਸੁਦਾਚਾਰ ਸੁਰੂਤੀ ਸਾਸਤਰ ਵਚਨ ਅਵਿਰੂਪ ਉਚਾਰਿਓ ॥

ਨੀਰ ਖੀਰ ਵਿਚਰਨ ਪਰਮ ਹੰਸਨਿ ਉਰਧਾਰਿਓ ॥

ਭਗਵਤ ਕ੍ਰਿਪਾ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦ ਪਰਮਗਤ ਇਤ ਤਨ ਪਾਈ ॥

ਰਾਜ ਸਿੰਘਾਸਨ ਬੈਠਿ ਗਿਆਤਿ ਪਰਤੀਤ ਦਿਖਾਈ ॥

ਵਰਣਾਸਰਮ ਅਭਿਮਾਨ ਤਜਿ ਪਦ ਰਜ ਬੰਦਹਿ ਜਾਸ ਕੀ ॥

ਸੰਦੇਹ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਖੰਡਨ ਨਿਧਨ ਬਾਣੀ ਵਿਮਲ ਰੈਦਾਸ ਕੀ ॥

Nābhādāsa *Sri Bhaktamāla* with commentary in poetry by Priyādāsa and in prose by Roopkalā. Lucknow, Teja Kumar Press, 1969, p. 470. This is another commentary on Nābhādāsa and it is used only at one or two places.

The *Bhaktamāla* is written in a highly compressed style which is difficult to understand without the help of a commentary. The first commentary on it was written almost a century after its compilation, in Samvata 1763 (1706 A.D.) by Priyadāsa at the suggestion of Nābhādāsa himself.³⁸ It is written in simple Hindi in the poetic form *kabittas* (a poetic metre). The commentary is an amplification of the original, supplementing the accounts of Nābhādāsa. In this commentary nine *Kabittas* are devoted to Ravidāsa.

Following is a summary of Priyadāsa's account of Ravidāsa :

Swāmi Rāmānanda has a *brahmacāri* (celibate) disciple, who collects alms for Swāmijī. One day due to the heavy rains the *brahmacāri* cannot go to the town and accepts alms from a nearby house. The owner of the house has dealings with the *camāras*, his food therefore, is impure. Swāmijī makes an offering of the same food to the deity, but on that day he finds he cannot concentrate on the deity. When he learns of the impurity of the food he puts a curse on his disciple to be born in a *camāra* family. The disciple dies on the spot and takes birth in the house of a *camāra*. The child retains the impressions of his previous life and refuses to accept any nourishment from his *camāra* parents. Rāmānanda learns of it in a dream. He rushes to the house where the child is born and whispers the initiatory *mantra* (formula) in his ear. At this he accepts the breast of his mother. Rāmānanda also names the child Ravidāsa.

From the very beginning of his life the child Ravidāsa is of a religious inclination, totally unattached to worldly riches. When Ravidāsa is still young, his father arranges his marriage. He spends the money he gets from his father in the service of holy men. Displeased at his behaviour, his father turns him out of the house. He makes a hut behind his father's house and starts living there with his wife, earning his livelihood by making shoes. The little money that he can save out of his

38. Kedāra Nātha Yatindra, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

meagre income, he continues to spend in the service of holy men.

Realizing the financial distress of his devotee Lord Viṣṇu comes to him in the guise of a saint. He stays with Ravidāsa for a night and gives him a philosopher's stone, before leaving, saying that he should make use of it in time of need. When Lord Viṣṇu comes back after thirteen months, he finds the stone lying untouched in the same corner. Having failed to tempt Ravidāsa the Lord does another miracle. He puts some gold coins in the basket that Ravidāsa uses to keep accessories for worship. Seeing this miracle, Ravidāsa grows suspicious of worship itself. At this, the Lord appears to him in a dream and desires of him to accept the money and make use of it in the service of the deity. With this money Ravidāsa erects a temple for the worship of the deity, and makes himself the chief priest.

This practice of Ravidāsa invites criticism of him by the bigoted *brāhmaṇas*. They complain to the king that a *sūdra* is leading the worship of the *śālagrāma*³⁹ and poisoning the people with his *prasāda* (food offered to the deity). They request the king to stop Ravidāsa from worship and save the sanctity of *varṇadharma*.

Ravidāsa is summoned to the royal court, where he argues that if God dwells in all hearts, everyone has the right to love and worship Him. The hymn infused with intense divine love which Ravidāsa then recites, convinces everyone of the profundity and sincerity of his devotion. The king pays his respect to Ravidāsa and allows him to continue his worship freely.

On another occasion, Queen Jhālī of Cittor comes on a pilgrimage to Kāśī. She visits Ravidāsa and is so much impressed by his saintliness that she professes him as her preceptor. The *brāhmaṇas* who are accompanying her feel so indignant that when they return to Cittor, they complain to the

39. Black stone of different sizes found in the river Gaṇḍaki, which is believed to be the sperm of Viṣṇu and which is worshipped by the Hindus, Cf. Benzamin Walker, *Hindu World* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), Vol. 2, p. 584.

king against the queen. The king, at the advice of his learned counsellors, invites Ravidāsa to Cittor. A grand feast is arranged in his honour to which all the *brāhmānas* are also invited. The *brāhmānas*, however, refuse to eat anything while sitting with Ravidāsa. Arrangements are made for the *brāhmānas* to prepare their own food. To everyone's surprise, as they sit down to eat they find Ravidāsa sitting between each pair of *brāhmānas*. They repent for their behaviour and become his disciples. At the same feast Ravidāsa showed a sacred gold thread under his skin as a mark of high *varṇa*.

Priyadāsa's amplification of Nābhādāsa's *Bhaktamāla* provides useful information regarding life and teachings of Ravidāsa, but being a committed *brāhmaṇa* he does not recognize *śūdra*'s right to be initiated into spiritual life. Ravidāsa, according to him succeeds in seeking initiation not because of his devotional bent of mind but because of his high *varṇa* and association with Swāmi Rāmānanda in his previous life.

After Priyadāsa a large number of commentaries are written in almost all the varnacular languages. The first commentary in Punjābi is by Jaswant Singh, the king of Nābhā (1773-1841 A.D.), whose pen name is Kīrtī Singh. A manuscript copy of this commentary by Rāma Singh, the scribe of Nābhā Darbār (Court) of 1842 A.D. is preserved in the Central State Library of Patiala.⁴⁰ Kīrtī Singh in his commentary devotes thirty-five stanzas to Ravidāsa. He reproduces almost all the above noted legends, with the addition of two new legends. The first legend is about Ravidāsa's offering of a *damdi* (a coin) which the Gaṅgā receives raising her hands from the waters, and in return gives a golden bangle as a gift from her for Ravidāsa. The other legend tells of the miraculous effect of his hymn on the people in the court of the king of Banārasa. So miraculous is the effect of his hymns that even the stone idol moves to his arms.

40. Serial No. 475; Acc. No. 2573.

It may be recalled that the legends relating to the gift of Gaṅgā for Ravidāsa and the moving of the idol to the arms of the saint do not find favour with the *brāhmaṇical* accounts of Ravidāsa, but they are found in almost all the accounts of the saint in Punjābi from Bhāī Gurdāsa onward.

Paricayis By Anantadāsa

Anantadāsa is a Vallabha saint from the same religious tradition as Agradāsa.⁴¹ There is a manuscript copy of the *Paricayis* of Samvata 1740 (1683 A.D.),⁴² but according to Joginder Singh, Anantadāsa probably wrote the *Paricayis* in Samvata 1646 (1589 A.D.).⁴³ These *Paricayis* are written in the form of poetry and relate the lives of the saints like Nāmadeva, Kabīra, Ravidāsa and Pīpā. Most of the legends in the *Paricayis* are the same as Priyadāsa's legends; however, there are considerable variations as far as the number of legends regarding each saint and the difference in details in common legends is concerned.⁴⁴

According to the *Paricayis*, Ravidāsa is a *brāhmaṇa* in his previous life, but for his habit of meat eating he is born in *camāra* family in Banārasa. His devotion to God becomes more and more profound as he grows up. At the age of seven he perfects himself in the art of *navadhābhakti* (nine-fold loving devotion). For his inattention to the family business, he is turned out of the house. Anantadāsa in this *Paricayi* also mentions the dialogue between Kabīra and Ravidāsa. From this account we learn of the nature of the devotion of Ravidāsa and his relation with Santa Kabīra.

We also find a Punjabi version of the *Paricayis of the bhaktas*, called *Pothī Premābodha*. A manuscript copy dated Samvata 1750 (1693 A.D.) is available in the Central State

41. Rāmānanda Sāstri and Virendra Pāndey, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

42. Bhagvata Brata Misra, *op. cit.*.

43. Joginder Singh, *Santa Raidāsa* (Delhi, Akaśar Parkashan, 1972).

44. For the Summary of the *Paricayi* of Ravidāsa I am indebted to Bhagvata Miśra, *op. cit.*

Library, Patiala.⁴⁵ It includes the account of sixteen saints in all with twenty-nine stanzas devoted to Ravidāsa. The author does not seem to have been directly influenced by Nābhādāsa, Anantadāsa and Priyadāsa. This account, comparatively speaking, is free from the *brāhmaṇical* bias against Ravidāsa. According to this work, Ravidāsa, a great devotee of God, belongs to a *camāra* family of Kāśī and his profession is that of a cobbler. The story of his giving a coin to the *brāhmaṇa* as an offering for the Gaṅgā is repeated, though with some differences in details. Ravidāsa here is also shown as miraculously producing another golden bangle from a pitcher of Gaṅgā water.

In this work, unlike some other accounts, Mīrābāī is said to have been initiated by Ravidāsa. The opposition of the *brāhmaṇas* in this case is defeated by making the idol float on the water with the effect of the hymn that he recites in the royal court.

The author devotes special attention to describe the intensity and profundity of the devotion of Ravidāsa. Ravidāsa, he says is devoted to God in thought, word and deed. Absolutely detached from the world, he always remains attuned to God. Pleased at his devotion, God appears to him and grants him the fulfilment of any desire that he might have. At this Ravidāsa replies most humbly, "When nothing *apart from You* exists, O Lord, and You are with me, what else remains to be desired." *Premābodha* is unique among other *Parcis* because it throws light on the nature of devotion of Ravidāsa, his realization of God and his relation with Mīrābāī. Compared to the other works, it seems to be based more on the hymns of the saints,

45. *Pothi Premābodha*, Serial No. 485, Acc. No. 2584. Central State Library, Patiala. Referring to another manuscript copy of *Premabodha* in the Library of Panjab University, Lahore (MS. No. 528), Mohan Singh Devana says, "The copy is dated 1693 A.D. I think it is original copy of the work composed at Anandpura under the direction of Guru Gobind Singh. The work was printed at Amritsar some decades ago. Its accounts are completely independent of and different from Nābhājī's *Bhaktamāla*. They are [Nābhājī's } at the same time far from satisfactory and dependable." *A History of Punjabi Literature* (Jullundur, Bharat Prakashan, 1971), p. 41.

than on the legends regarding them. This *pothī* in this respect is indispensable, for any understanding of the life and thought of Bhakta Ravidāsa.

Bhaktanāmāvalī by Dhruvadāsa

Dhruvadāsa was born in Samvata 1595 (1538 A.D.) in Devbandhu. He belongs to the Rādhāvallabhīya sect and was a great poet, a commentator and a profound thinker. He wrote more than forty books.⁴⁶ The *Bhaktanāmāvalī* is written between Samvata 1645 and 1680 (1588 and 1623 A.D.).⁴⁷ It includes brief accounts of the lives of 130 saints in less than 114 *chandas*. As the title of the book reveals, primarily it is a list of the names of the saints, but, the author also attempts to delineate the spiritual attainments of the saints. Dhruvadāsa in this account describes Ravidāsa as a great devotee, a realized soul, whose presence purifies the world.⁴⁸

Agastya Samhitā

This text is of a considerably earlier period and its account of Rāmānanda has been accepted as fairly accurate by such scholars as Bhandarkar, Grierson and Barthwal.⁴⁹ In this text whose name is given as Ramādāsa has been included among the disciples of Rāmānada. Ramādāsa, the text maintains, is an incarnation of Yama (the god of death) is a Vaiṣṇava by faith and a great devotee and liberal thinker.⁵⁰

46. Kedāra Nātha Divedi Yatindra, *Śrīhita Dhruvadāsa aur Unkā Sahitya*, *op. cit.*, Introduction.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 345.

48. रामानन्द अंगद सेवु हरिविआस अरु छीउ ॥
ऐक ऐर के नाम ते सबा जगा होइआ पनीउ ॥
सिनि सिन भक्तिनि पूर्ति के, ताके बस भडे आनि ॥
जगउ विद्विउ पौरा, धैना अरु रैदास कबीर ॥
महापीर दिझ ऐक रस, भरे भक्ति गंडीर ॥

As quoted by B.P. Sharma, *Santa Gurū Ravidāsa*, p. 56.

49. Badarīnārāyaṇa Srivāstava, *Rāmānanda Sampradaya Tathā Hindi Sāhitya Para Usakā Prabhāva*. (Prayaga, Hindi Prisada, Parisad University 1957), p. 32.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

The Sanskrit commentary *Rahasyatriya* by Agrāswāmi also includes Ravidāsa (Ramādāsa) among the *Bhāgavatas* and says he is a devoted preacher of *Bhāgavata* faith.⁵¹

Bhaviṣya Purāṇa

In this *brāhmaṇic* text, we find some useful references regarding the life of Ravidāsa. The name of his father, according to this account is Māṇḍāsa. Ravidāsa, as the text relates, comes to Banārasa and defeats Kabīra in a discussion. Having defeated him, he goes to Saṃkarācārya for debate. The debate continues for a day and night. At last he is defeated by Saṃkarācārya. After this defeat he comes to Rāmānanda to be initiated by him as his disciple.⁵²

Ravidāsa Rāmāyana

The *Rāmāyana*⁵³ written in Hindi language is an early text that deals with the life of Bhakta Ravidāsa but its exact date is not known and the original manuscript is not available. Though of legendary nature, it is a full length study of the saint. A cursory study of the text reveals that the original text has been considerably changed, most probably to suit the sectarian view-points of its editors. The present version of the text is written from the *brāhmaṇical* point of view. Ravidāsa is represented as a zealous preacher of the *brāhmaṇic* faith, who strongly defends the *Sāstras*, *Śmṛtis* and the institutions of *varnāśrama* (institution of caste and station in life). He is said

51. रामादासी मासठ मित्तिदासी ॥ मदा ब्रागदउ परम पूरासी ॥

निह किंचन उदार गुरु मेही ॥ भावित रामदैत्यव वे उद्दी ॥

As quoted by Roop Kala in *Sri Bhaktumāla*, p. 285.

52. उमकार गृहे जाते द्वितीय पिंगला पाति मानदासज उन्हें रैदास इति विद्वि ॥ ५३ ॥

पुरी काती ममामाम्बा क्षीति राम उपरम ॥

मित्ता मत विवादेन मैकराचारज ब्राह्म ॥ ५४ ॥

उत्ते विवादेत्तम उद्वदमे रात्रु मतात्तरे ॥

परमित्तह स रैदास डैवात इस सुत्तम ॥ ५५ ॥

रामानंद मुपागाम उमज मिसजत्तव माराते ॥

Bhaviṣyapurāṇa, Part 4, chapter 18, Sloka 53-56.

53. Bakhsidāsa, *Ravidāsa Rāmāyana*, edited by Sri Rayya Rama Misra, (Mathura, Shyama Kāsi Press, 1970, (second)

to be a severe critic of the Muslims and their faith, and is shown performing the *suddhī* (purification) of Sadhanā, bringing him back to the fold of Brāhmanism. One does not find these socio-religious biases while reading through the verses of Ravidāsa. Despite these limitations, the text nevertheless provides valuable information regarding the life of the saint, but it can only be usefully employed by keeping in mind the editorial bias.

The text maintains that Ravidāsa belongs to the Cambara family of the *camāras*. The names of his grandfather and grandmother were Hariyānanda and Cattar Kaur respectively. The names of his father and mother were Rāhū and Karmā. Ravidāsa is born on Sunday (*Ravivārā*). From the very beginning of his life he is of a saintly nature. Before coming to Rāmānanda he has a series of discussions on the philosophical and theological issues with the *brāhmaṇas*. At first Rāmānanda is unwilling to accept him as his disciple but later on when Ravidāsa threatens to commit suicide Rāmānanda initiates him.

Ravidāsa is represented as a great defender of the religion of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. The text includes a dialogue between Kabīra and Ravidāsa. Kabīra is shown as an egoistic saint, who dislikes Ravidāsa for his low birth, and does not even accept drinking water from him. The text further shows Kabīra repenting over his egoistic behaviour when he comes to know of the consequences of the refusal. He receives a severe rebuke at the hands of Ravidāsa when he comes to repent over his mistake.

In this text Mīrābāī is described as a disciple of Ravidāsa who is initiated by him at Panghata. Gorakhanātha is also said to have visited Ravidāsa. He tries to tempt Ravidāsa with his miracles but fails. He appreciates Ravidāsa for his exalted spiritual life. Saint Sadhnā also pays a visit to Ravidāsa. Ravidāsa performs his *suddhī* and brings him back to the fold of Brāhmanism. Ravidāsa is summoned by Sikander Lodhi to

give an explanation regarding a complaint he is charged with being a dogmatic Hindu who preaches against Islam. Ravidāsa escapes the punishment by performing some miracles.

Queen Yogāvati invites Ravidāsa to Chittor and professes him as her *gurū* (preceptor). At the feast of Yogāvati, Ravidāsa multiplies himself to break the false pride of the *brāhmaṇas*. At last Ravidāsa comes to *Gangā ghāṭa* (bank of the river Gaṅgā), where he leaves his mortal body while in a state of *samādhi* (meditation).

Bhaktiśīlāmrta

Mahīpati, an eighteenth century Marāthī writer, has devoted a chapter of his book, the *Bhaktiśīlāmrta* to the saint. This account is based on the *Bhaktamāla* of Nābhādāsa, therefore we need not go into its details.

Raidāsapurāṇa

This text available in Hindi also gives a legendary account of the saint. He is said to belong to the *Disihā* family of the *camāras*. He has a son whose name is Vijyadāsa, who marries to the daughter of a king. The *Purāṇa*⁵⁴ is probably written by some follower of Ravidāsa.

Cambara Purāṇa

This *purāṇa*⁵⁵ traces the origin and history of the *Cambara* caste. It also includes an account of the life of Ravidāsa. The details of his life given here are mostly the same as those in the above mentioned sources. Ravidāsa is a resident of Kāśī. The name of his father is Raghū. Mīrābāī is one of his disciples. During the last days of his life, Ravidāsa goes to Manduāra state (Rajasthan), where he dies in a temple while performing worship.

Bhagvāna Ravidāsa Ki Satya Kathā

This modern anthology⁵⁶ contains almost all the legends

54. Ms. copy of A.D. 1921 is in the possession of Parasurāma Caturvedi.

55. Mahanta Slookdāsa, *Cambara Purāṇa*, 1950 (second).

56. Ram Caran Kuril, *Bhagvāna Ravidās Ki Satya Kathā*, edited by Madhukar Misra, Samvata 2007.

regarding the life of Ravidāsa, by one of his devout followers. Ravidāsa according to this account, is born in Kāśī. He lives during the reign of Sikander Lodhi and is a contemporary of saint Kabīra. He is a disciple of Swāmi Rāmānanda. Mīrābāi and Jhālībāi are both his disciples. Ravidāsa is born on the fullmoon day of Māgha (January-February), Samvata 1471 (1414 A.D.) and dies in Samvata 1597 (1540 A.D.), making his age 126 years and 14 days. The main significance of this book lies in the fact that it includes almost all the legends concerning Ravidāsa and secondly it also gives an account of all the places associated with Bhakta Ravidāsa.

In Punjābi literature also, there is well-developed tradition of such literature on Ravidāsa. Earlier we have referred to the commentary on *Bhaktāmāla* and the *Parcis* of the saints. In addition, there are *sākhīs*⁵⁷ and *kissās*⁵⁸ dealing with his life.

Modern Works

In recent years some studies along scientific lines have been made in the life and thought of Ravidāsa. The main concern of these studies is to preserve what the ravages of time have spared of Ravidāsa. The authors have attempted to establish the historicity of his life on sound foundations, to build a system of his beliefs, to compile his verses and to appreciate their literary merits. In brief, theirs is an attempt to rediscover Ravidāsa and make him relevant to our present-day situation, to be guided by him as he has been guiding thousands of people, through the centuries.

Bhāgavata Brata Miśra's Ph.D. thesis *Santa Ravidāsa and His Panth* is perhaps the first full-length study of Ravidāsa. As this important work is still unpublished, a brief introduction is necessary. In the first chapter, the author makes a survey of the sources on Ravidāsa, in the second chapter, he studies

57. Barkat Singh Anand, *Janamasākhi*, Amritsar, Chattar Singh, Jivan Singh Jamnādāsa, Jaswant Singh Ravidāsa Pargāsa Sita Darbari Gurdwārā, Ravidāspura, District Ludhiana, 1932.

58. Hirādāsā, *Ravidāsa Deepa*, Amritsar, Gurmat Press, 1920; Jamnadas, *op. cit.*;

Variyām Singh Chandar, *Sri Ravidāsa Līlā*, Ludhiana, Satluja Printing Press.

the social, economic and religious conditions of the followers of Ravidāsa and their religious beliefs, traditions, and practices, and the various sects. It analyses the relation of the followers of Ravidāsa with other religious communities such as Śiva Nārāyaṇi, Satnāmī and the Sikhs and gives a brief account of the *gaddīs* (religious centres) and their religious festivals. The third chapter traces the impact of socio-cultural factors on the life of Bhakta Ravidāsa, the fourth chapter is devoted to the authenticity of the hymns of Bhakta Ravidāsa, the fifth chapter studies the religious doctrines of Bhakta Ravidāsa; the sixth chapter describes the path of God realization, as found in the hymns of Ravidāsa; the last chapter is an appreciation of the literary qualities of the verses of Ravidāsa. Although the work covers almost all aspects of the life of Ravidāsa, it has the limitations of all the pioneer works.

Rāmānanda Śāstrī and Virendra Pāndey's book is also significant attempt in this field. Some other modern scholars who have made valuable contributions towards the understanding of life and faith of Ravidāsa are H.H. Wilson, G.A. Grierson, M.A. Mecaulliffe, W.G. Briggs, K.M. Sen, R.D. Ranade, Rāma Kumāra Varmā, Paraśu Rām Caturvedi, Hazāri Prasāda Divedi, Pitāmber Dutta Barthwāl, S.L. Pandey, Viyogi, Harī, Sāhib Singh, Joginder Singh, Jodh Singh, Prithvi Singh Azāda, B.P. Sharma, Darshan Singh, Manmohan Singh, Padam Gurcharan Singh, Dharam Pāl Sareen, Jasbir Singh Sabar, etc.

It is not possible nor is it necessary to discuss all these works as they are studies of a similar nature and are easily available. However, where these works are particularly significant we have referred to them in this study. It may be mentioned here that Ravidāsa studies are still in their inception and it will take years to reach a stage of maturity in this area. It is a happy sign that Ravidāsa, who has been ignored for centuries, has started attracting the attention of scholars.

CHAPTER II

THE LIFE OF BHAKTA RAVIDĀSA

In the present chapter an attempt is made to reconstruct the life history of Bhakta Ravidāsa by analyzing, on the basis of the source material discussed in the preceding chapter, such aspects as his name, life duration, parentage, place of birth, caste and profession, initiation, later life and journeys.

Name

A strange phenomenon regarding Ravidāsa is that we find more than ten versions of his name. The name we find in the hymns incorporated in the holy *Gurūgranthasāhib* is 'Ravidāsa'. Gurū Rāmadāsa,¹ Gurū Arjana Deva² and Bhāī Gurdāsa³ also use 'Ravidāsa' when referring to him. The version of the name that we find in the *Bhaktamāla* of Nābhādāsa,⁴ and in *Raidāsaji Kī Bāñi*⁵ is 'Raidāsa'. Mīrābāi, in her verses, mostly calls him 'Raidāsa',⁶ but occasionally refer him by the name 'Rohidāsa'.⁷ Likewise we find other forms of his name such as Ruidāsa,⁸ Ramādāsa,⁹ Raedāsa,¹⁰ Rohitāsa,¹¹ Rahdāsa.¹² In this context, the question that may

1. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, p. 733.

2. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, p. 487.

3. Bhāī Gurdāsa, *Vārāñi*, XXIII, 15.

4. Nābhādāsa, *op. cit.*, p. 470.

5. *Raidāsaji Kī Bāñi*.

6. *Mīrābāi Ki Sabdāvali aur Jivana* (Allahabad, Belvdere Press), p. 25.

7. 'Mīrā Madhuri' (Introduction). As quoted by Prabhāt. *op. cit.*, p. 170.

8. S. N. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism* (New York, Frederick Unger, 1972), p. 162.

9. Samskrit Commentary of Rahasyatrya as quoted in *Srī Bhaktamāla*, p. 255.

10. G. W. Briggs, *The Chamars* (Calcutta, Association Press, 1920), p. 207.

11. Sangam Lal Pandey, *Santa Raidāsa* (Allahabad, Darśana Peetha), p. 8.

12. *Ibid.*

be asked is how do we ascertain whether or not all these different names do all refer to Ravidāsa which one of them is his original name, and why have there been different versions?

To solve this problem we can seek help from the verses attributed to Ravidāsa, where we find references to the personal life of the author. We have already noticed that the name of the author of the forty hymns found in the *Gurūgranthasāhib* is 'Ravidāsa'. But in the collection of verses entitled *Raidāsajī Kī Bāñī* we find 'Raidāsa' as the name of the author. Most of the hymns in both these collections are the same and their author, as the internal references show, is the same person who belongs to a Śūdra family of Banārasa. From this, it seems likely that 'Ravidāsa' and 'Raidāsa' are two different versions of the same name. For Mīrābāi 'Raidāsa' and 'Raidāsa' is the same person whom she professes as her spiritual enlightener. Similarly 'Ruidāsa', 'Ramādāsa', 'Raedāsa' and 'Rahdāsa' also refer to the same person.

As far as the question of the original name is concerned, it is perhaps safest to depend on the hymns which are supposed to be the most authentic. The form of his name used in the *Gurūgranthasāhib* is 'Ravidāsa'. We have little reason to question that this was not his original name. The editor of the *Raidāsajī Kī Bāñī* also maintains that the name that Rāmānanda gives to the child is 'Ravidāsa', but later on people start calling him 'Raidāsa'.¹³ 'Ravidāsa', and likewise all the other forms of his name are either phonetically modified or abbreviated forms of the original name. Rāmānanda Śāstri¹⁴ and Sangam Lal Pandey¹⁵ also contend that the original name of the saint is Ravidāsa.

The question that remains to be discussed is why do we find various forms of his name? First, in those days, communication was oral rather than written; hence there was no

13. *Raidāsajī Kī Bāñī*, p. 1.

14. Rāmānanda Śāstri, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

15. Sangam Lal Pandey, *Existence, Devotion and Freedom*, Allahabad, Darśana Peeth, 1961), p. 6. Pandey explains,

All other names are variants of the original name Ravidāsa, which in accordance with the phonetics of the regional languages of India became Rūidasa in Bengal, Rohidāsa in Maharashtra, Raidāsa in Uttar Pradesh and Ravidāsa in Punjab."

single authentic written text giving the 'correct' version of his name. Second, Ravidāsa who was a widely known and respected saint with followers among people of different regions and languages, was remembered by the name best suited to their accent and language 'Ruidāsa', for example, is the Banglā version, and 'Rohidāsa' is the Marāthī version of his name.¹⁶

Life Duration

All that we find in the early writings on the life of the saint are scattered references to the people, who were his contemporaries, and to Ravidāsa, by his contemporaries. It is on the basis of such references alone that we can attempt to establish the era in which he lived. We learn from these sources that he is a disciple of Svāmi Rāmānanda and that Dhannā, another disciple of Rāmānanda, seeks inspiration for his spiritual life from the lives of Nāmadeva, Kabīra, Ravidāsa and Saina. Kabīra is a contemporary of Ravidāsa who, however, passes away before him. Kabīra is said to have a dialogue with Ravidāsa on religious issues. Jhālībāi, and Mīrābāi are both said to have been initiated by Ravidāsa into the spiritual life. During his lifetime, Ravidāsa perhaps witnessed the reign of Sikander Lodhi. In the light of the relationship of Bhakta Ravidāsa with the above mentioned historical personalities, we may assign approximate dates for his birth and activities.

Rāmānanda

Svāmi Rāmānanda is said to have initiated Ravidāsa into the spiritual life; his dates perhaps will help us in our attempt to work out the dates of Ravidāsa.

There is a great deal of uncertainty regarding the dates of Rāmānanda, widely divergent dates have been suggested by different authors. Nābhādāsa places Rāmānanda as fourth in the spiritual descent from Rāmānuja (1017-1137 A.D.).¹⁷ The other spiritual teachers mentioned between Rāmānuja and Rāmānanda are Devācarya, Haryānanda and Rāghavānanda,

16. Sangam Lal Pandey, *op. cit.* pp. 7-8.

17. *Sri Bhaktamāla*, pp. 282-83

Nābhādāsa does not give any dates for Rāmānanda but Sitārāma Sarana Bhagvāna Prasāda, on the basis of *Agastya Samhita* gives Samvata 1356 and Kalyuga 4400 (1299 A.D.) as the date of his birth.¹⁸ R.G. Bhandarkar¹⁹ and G.A. Grierson²⁰ accept this date on the same authority. This date says Bhandarkar, is consistent with the traditional statement that there were three generations between Rāmānanda and Rāmānuja (1017-1137 A.D.).²¹

Macauliffe, however, maintains that Rāmānanda must have flourished at the end of the fourteenth and the first half of fifteenth centuries. This era, in his view, corresponds with another reckoning which may be employed as a chronological test.²² J.N. Farquhar gives 1400-1470 A.D. as the approximate dates of Rāmānanda, which places him 350 years after Rāmānuja and makes him a contemporary of Pīpā (born in A.D. 1425),²³ and Kabīra,²⁴ his disciples further argues that both forms of the *gurūparmparā*, (tradition of gurūship) given by Grierson²⁵ would agree well with this interval. Tara Chand contends that the *gurūpramparā*, as Nābhādāsa gives is incomplete²⁶ for he mentions the names of only those saints who were most renowned. On the authority of Sitārāma Sarana Bhagvāna Prasāda,²⁷ Tara Chand argues that Rāmānanda was

18. 'Sri Bhaktamāla', as quoted by Tara Chand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture* (Allahabad, The Indian Press, 1963, p. 143).

19. R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaisnavism Saivism and Minor Religious Systems* (Varanasi, Indological Book House, 196), p. 669.

20. George A. Grierson, 'Ramanand's Ramawats', in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. X, edited by James Hastings (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1913), P. 119.

21. R.G. Bandarkar, *op. cit.*, p.67.

22. M.A. Maculiffe, *The Sikh Religion*, Vol. VI (New Delhi, S.Chand & Co...1963), p. 101, By another reckoning Macauliffe means the date of the birth of Kabīra, a disciple of Rāmānanda. This date is 1398 A.D. He says that A.D. 1908, on the basis of the authority of the followers of Kabīra is 510th of his (Kabīra's) era. Hence the era of Kabīra begins from 1398 A.D.

23. *Ibid.*, p. III.

24. J.N. Farquhar, *An Outlines of the Religious Literature of India* (Delhi, Motilal Banarasidass, 1967), p.323.

25. *Indian Antiquities*: XXII. 266.

26. Tara chand, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-144.

27. *Sri Bhaktamāla* p. 264.

twenty-second in descent. If twenty teachers followed Rāmānuja before Rāmānanda, it is more likely that he was born at the end of the fourteenth century than at the end of the thirteenth century. The approximate date of Rāmānanda's death Tara Chand maintains is the first half of the fifteenth century.

In the *Rāmārcana Paddhati* also the *gurūpramparā* is not the same as the one given by Nābhādāsa.²⁸ The authorship of this *grantha* (book) is attributed to Rāmānanda himself, but this is not accepted by all scholars. According to this version of the *gurūpramparā* Rāmānanda is fourteenth in descent from Rāmānuja. From this version also the date of Rāmānanda (1299 A.D.) as given in *Agastaya Samihita*, i.e. only 162 years after Rāmānuja seems quite improbable. It is too short a period to cover at least twelve generations.

Following Macauliffe, Farquhar and Tara Chand, we may assume that the last quarter of the fourteenth century is the period of Rāmānanda's birth. A span of 250 years is quite consistent with the life span of the twelve teachers between Rāmānuja and Rāmānanda. Rāmānanda according the *Bhaktamāla* lives for more than 110 years; so the period of his activities may extend till the end of the third quarter of the fifteenth century (i.e.C.1375-1475).

Dhannā

Bhakta Dhannā, a disciple of Rāmānanda is a contemporary of Ravidāsa. A Jata by caste, he lives in a village Dhuan in the Tonk Territory of Rājputānā. He is born in the year of 1415 A.D.²⁹ According to Gurū Arjana the fifth Nanak, Dhannā is inspired in his spiritual life by the examples of Nāmdeva, Kabīra, Ravidāsa and Saina.³⁰ Mīrābāi also mentions Dhannā as a great saint.³¹ The fact that he seeks inspiration from the lives of these great saints need not lead us to the conclusion that he is younger than all of them. It is quite possible that

28. *Sri Bhaktamāla*, p. 264. As quoted by Pandita Baladeva Upādhyā, *Bhāgavata Sampradāye*, (Kāśī Nāgarī Prachārani Sabhā, Samvata, 2010) pp. 248-49.

29. M.A. Macauliffe, op. cit., p. 106.

30. *Gurūgranthasāhīb*, Āsā, M. 5, p. 487.

31. Bankey Bihari, *Bhakta Mīrā* (Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, 1971) appendix, p. 165.

he is a contemporary of Kabīra, Ravidāsa and Saina and comes in contact with them only in the later part of his life when they have achieved reputations as great saints.

Kabīra

The dates of Bhakta Kabīra, a contemporary of Ravidāsa are also shrouded in obscurity. Scholars give contradictory views regarding his dates, but without going into the details of controversy; we shall try to establish the approximate period, of Kabīra's life on the basis of the earliest available sources.

As noted above Dhannā, born in 1415, is a contemporary of Kabīra, Ravidāsa and Saina. Almost all the early accounts maintain that Kabīra and Ravidāsa are contemporaries and that, while both were disciples of Rāmānanda,³² Kabīra passes away before Ravidāsa.³³ We learn from the hymns of Kabīra that he

32 Sri Bhaktamālu, p. 281. According to Priyadāsa's commentary both Kabīra and Rайдāsa accompanied Rāmānanda when the latter pays a visit to Gagraun on the request of Pīpā another disciple of Rāmānanda, Bhaktamālu, pp. 495-96; Saini, *op. cit.*, Anandāsa, *op. cit.*.. In one of his poems Kabīra himself proclaims that his preceptor is Rāmānanda. "I became suddenly revealed in Benaras, and Rāmānand illumined me." Rabindranath Tagore, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, p. 36. At another place in the *Bijaka* kabīra makes mention of Rāmānanda :

ਆਪਨ ਆਸ ਕਿਸੈ ਬਹੁਤੇਰਾ ॥ ਕਹ ਨ ਮਰਮ ਪਾਵਲ ਹਰਿ ਕੇਰਾ ॥
 ਇੰਦ੍ਰੀ ਕਹਾ ਕਰੇ ਵਿਸਰਾਮਾ ॥ ਸੇ ਕਹਾ ਗਾਏ ਜੇ ਕਹਿਤੇ ਹੋਤੇ ਰਾਮਾ ॥
 ਸੇ ਕਹਾ ਗਾਏ ਜੇ ਹੋਤ ਸਮਾਨਾ ॥ ਹੋਏ ਮਿਤੁਕ ਵਹਿ ਪਦਹਿੰ ਸਮਾਨਾ ॥
 ਰਾਮਾ ਨੰਦ, ਰਾਮ ਰਸ ਮਾਤੇ ॥ ਕਹਹਿ ਕਬੀਰ ਹਮ ਕਹਿ ਕਹਿ ਥਾਕੇ ॥ 77 ॥

Bijaka (Vārānasi, Kabīrabānī Prakasana Kendra, Samvata 2031), p. 177. In another text, entitled *Rāmānanda Kī Hindi Racnāye* edited by Pitamber Dati Bārthwal, (Kāśī Nāgari Pracārani Sabhā in Samvata 2012). We find a *gosta* of Rāmānanda and Kabīr. The title of the *gosta* has been given as *Jñāna Tilaka*. This *gosta* also approves of the above relationship of Kabīra and Rāmānanda. Mohan Singh Dewana informs us of a manuscript copy of a *gosta* (Ms. No. 512 HIFZ-UL-ULUM, private library, Changar Mohalla, Lahore), between Kabīra and Nānak. The same *gosta* contains a hymn by Nānak in which the names of both Kabīra and Ravidāsa occur, who are mentioned as the disciples of Rāmānanda Gurū Gosāin. The date of Ms. is 1711 A.D. *History of Punjabi Literature* (Jullundur, Sadasiva Prakasan, 1971), p. 41.

33. (ੴ) ਨਾਮਦੇਵ ਕਬੀਰ ਤਿਲੋਚਨ ਸਪਨਾ ਸੋਣੁ ਤਰੈ ॥

Gurūgranthasāhib, Mārū, Ravidāsa, p. 1106.

(ਅ) ਜਾਕੈ ਬਾਪ ਵੈਸੀ ਕਰੀ ਪ੍ਰਤੀ ਐਸੀ ਸਰੀ ਤਿਨ੍ਹੁ ਰੇ ਲੋਕ ਪਰਸਿਧ ਕਬੀਰਾ ॥

Gurūgranthasāhib Malāra, Ravidāsa, p. 1293.

(ਇ) ਨਿਰਗੁਨ ਨਾ ਗੁਨ ਦੇਖੈ ਆਈ ॥

ਦੇਖੀ ਸਹਿਤ ਕਬੀਰ ਸਿਧਾਈ ॥

Ravidāsa Jī Bāñi, pada 67.

suffers at the hands of Sikander Lodhī, the king of Delhi from 1489 to 1517 A.D., for the latter's bigotry.³⁴ From this internal evidence and from the tradition found among Kabīra's followers, we can safely assume that Kabīra was a contemporary of Sikander Lodhī. In this connection, if we accept the traditional dates of Kabīra prevalent among his followers, and which have been accepted by M.A. Macauliffe³⁵ and Triguṇāyata³⁶ they do not contradict the time period of the historical figures discussed above. The traditional *dohās* (couplets) regarding the dates of Kabīra's birth and death are as follows :

ਚੌਹ ਸੋ ਪਚਪਨ ਸਾਲ ਗਾਏ ਚੰਦ੍ਰਵਾਰ ਏਕ ਠਾਟ ਨਾਏ ॥

ਜੇਠ ਸੁਦੀ ਬਰਸਾਇ ਕੇ ਪੂਰਨਮਾਸੀ ਪ੍ਰਗਟ ਭਾਏ ॥³⁷

ਅਤੇ

ਪੰਦ੍ਰਹ ਸੋ ਪਚਹਤੱਨ ਕਿਥੇ ਮਗਹਰ ਕੇ ਗੋਨ ॥

ਮਾਘ ਸੁਦੀ ਏਕਾਦਸੀ ਰਲੋ ਪੋਨ ਮੇ ਪੋਨ ॥³⁸

34. (ੴ) ਭੁਜਾ ਬਾਧਿ ਭਿਲਾ ਕਰਿ ਡਾਰਓ ॥ ਹਸਤੀ ਕੋਪਿ ਮੂੰਡ ਮਹਿ ਮਾਰਿਓ ॥

ਹਸਤਿ ਭਾਗਿ ਕੈ ਚੀਸਾ ਮਾਰੈ ॥ ਇਆ ਮੂਰਿਤ ਕੈ ਹਉ ਬਲਿਹਾਰੈ ॥

ਆਹਿ ਮੇਰੇ ਠਭਰ ਤੁਮਰਾ ਜੇਰ ॥ ਕਾਜੀ ਬਕਥੇ ਹਸਤੀ ਤੇਰੁ ॥ 1 ॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

ਰੇ ਮਹਾਵਤ ਤੁਝੁ ਭਾਰਉ ਕਾਰਿ ॥ ਇਸਹਿ ਤੁਰਾਵਹੁ ਘਾਲਹੁ ਸਾਟਿ ॥

ਹਸਤਿ ਨ ਤੇਰੈ ਪਰੈ ਪਿਆਨ ॥ ਵਾ ਕੈ ਰਿਦੇ ਬਸੈ ਭਗਵਾਨੁ ॥ 2 ॥

ਕਿਆ ਅਪਰਾਧੁ ਸੰਤ ਕੈ ਕੀਨਾ ॥ ਬਾਧਿ ਪੇਟ ਕੁੰਚਰ ਕਉ ਦੀਨਾ ॥

ਕੁੰਚਰੁ ਪੇਟ ਲੈ ਲੈ ਨਮਸਕਾਰੈ ॥ ਬੂੜੀ ਨੀਂਹੀਂ ਕਾਜੀ ਅਪੀਆਰੈ ॥ 3 ॥

ਤੀਨਿ ਬਾਰ ਪਤੀਆ ਭਰਿ ਲੀਨਾ ॥ ਮਨ ਕਠੇਰੁ ਅਜਹੁ ਨ ਪਤੀਨਾ ॥

ਕਹਿ ਕਬੀਰ ਹਮਰਾ ਗੋਬਿੰਦੁ ॥ ਚਉਥੇ ਪਦ ਮਹਿ ਜਨ ਕੀ ਜਿੰਦੁ ॥ 4 ॥

Gurūgranthasāhib, Gauṇda, Kabīra, p. 870-71

(ਅ) ਗੰਗ ਗੁਸਾਇਨਿ ਰਹਿਰ ਰਗੀਰ ॥ ਸੰਜੀਰ ਬਾਧਿ ਕਰਿ ਖਰੇ ਕਬੀਰ ॥ 1 ॥

ਮਨੁ ਨ ਡਿਗੈ ਤਨੁ ਕਹੇ ਕਉ ਭਾਰਾਇ ॥ ਚਰਨ ਕਮਲ ਚਿਤੁ ਰਹਿਓ ਸਮਾਇ ॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

ਗੰਗਾ ਕੀ ਲਹਿਰ ਮੇਰੀ ਟੁਟੀ ਸੰਜੀਰ ॥ ਮਿਗ ਛਾਲਾ ਪਰ ਬੈਠੇ ਕਬੀਰ ॥ 2 ॥

ਕਹਿ ਕਬੀਰ ਕੋਊ ਸੰਗ ਨ ਸਾਥਿ ॥ ਜਲ ਕਲ ਰਾਖਨ ਹੈ ਰਘਨਾਥ ॥ 3 ॥

Gurūgranthasāhib, Bhairon, Kabīra, p. 1162.

Dharamdāsa a successor of Kabīra also mentions of the cruelties of Sikander towards kabīra :

ਸਾਹ ਸਿਕੰਦਰ ਜਲ ਮੇ ਬੋਰੇ ਬਹੁਰ ਅਗਨਿ ਪਰ ਜਾਰੇ ॥

ਬੇਗਮ ਹਾਥੀ ਆਨ ਝਕਾਏ ਸਿਹ ਤੁਪ ਦਿਖਾਏ ॥

ਲਿਰਗੁਣ ਕਥੈ ਅਭੈ ਪਦ ਗਾਵੈ ਜੀਵਨ ਕੇ ਸਮੁਝਾਏ ॥

ਕਾਜੀ ਪੰਡਿਤ ਸਤੀ ਹਰਾਏ ਪਾਰ ਕੋਊ ਨਹਿ ਪਾਏ ॥

'Dharamdāsa' as quoted by Baladeva Upādhiaya *op. cit.*, p. 251.

35. M A. Macauliffe, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-128 and 140.

36. Govinda Trigunyata, *Hindi Kī Nirguna Kāvya Dhārā Aur Uski Dārsnic Pristhahhūmī* (Kānpur, Sāhitya Niketana, 1961), p. 32.

37. As quoted by Parsu Rāma Caturvedi, *op. cit.*, p. 841.

38. 'Kabīra Kasāuti' as quoted in *Santa Mahātmān Kā Jīvan Caritara Samgreh* (Allahabad Belvedere Press, 1975),

that is Bhakta Kabīra is born in Samvata 1455 (1398 A.D.) and dies in Samvata 1575 (1518 A.D.) living to an old age of 120 years. Following these dates we can assume that he is approximately twenty-five or thirty years younger than Rāmānanda (born C.1375) and older than Dhannā (born 1415 A.D.). He may have gone under the tutelage of Rāmānanda at the age of twenty when the latter was more than forty-five years old. After coming in contact with Rāmānanda, he might have become his life-long companion. Tradition holds that he accompanied Rāmānanda during his visit to Gagraun the city of Pīpā,³⁹ and on a long journey to the South and Kānchī.⁴⁰ The only objection against our accepted dates may be the Rozā of Kabīra built by Bijli Khan in Samvata 1507 (1450 A.D.) as mentioned in the *Archaeological Survey of India*, North Western Provinces, Part 2, page 224. But if we accept Samvata 1507 (1450 A.D.) as the date of his death, there remains no possibility of his being contemporary of Sikander Lodhī. But the internal evidence strongly supports the fact of his persecution by Sikander Lodhī. Further it is maintained in the *Parcī* of Anantadāsa that Kabīra lived for 120 years.⁴¹ It is therefore quite possible that Bijlī Khān might have built the Rozā out of his respect for him while he was still alive.

Mīrābāī

Mīrābāī as we have already seen, often mentions her being initiated into the spiritual life by Ravidāsa. The time period she lives in, then, will prove helpful in determining the era of Ravidāsa. Mīrābāī is the only daughter of Rattan Singh, the younger brother of Biram De ruler of Merta, and she is the grand daughter of Dudājī, the founder of the Merta dynasty.⁴² She is born in far-off Mārwāra, in a village named Kurkī, Samvata 1555-1556 (1498-1499 A.D.)⁴³ Mīrābāī is married to

39. *Sri Bhaktamāla*, pp. 495-96.

40. Cetānādāsa, Prāsanga Pariyāta' as quoted by Badri Nārāyana Sri Vāsatava in *Rāmānanda Sampradāya Tuthā Hindī Sāhitya par Usakā Prabhāu* (Hindi Priṣada, 1975), p. 10.

41. Anantadāsa *Parcī* as quoted by Triguṇayata, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

42. Hermann Goetz, *Mirabai : Her Life and Times* (Bombay, Bhāratīya Vidya Bhavan, 1966), p. 4.

43. G.N. Sharma, *Social Life in Medieval Rajasthan* (Agra, Iakṣmi Narain Aggarwāl, Educational Publishers, 1968), P. 23?.

Bhoja Rāja, the elder son of Maharāṇā Sāṅgā, in 1516 A.D.⁴⁴ However, the discharge of marital obligations is short-lived; Bhoja Rāja seriously wounded in A.D. '1518 in the battle of Khatoli probably died from his wound in 1521'.⁴⁵ She becomes a widow at the young age of twenty-three.

The contemporary chronicles do not make any clear reference to the meeting of Mīrābāi with Bhakta Ravidāsa. Priyadāsa, the commentator of the *Bhaktamāla*, and Anantadāsa author of the *Parcīs* have mentioned Jhālī, the Queen of Cittor who comes to Banārasa and becomes a disciple of Ravidāsa.⁴⁶ She also invites Ravidāsa to Cittor. Both of these writers have maintained that Ravidāsa pays a visit to Cittor on the invitation of Queen Jhālī. The legend of his projecting himself in multiple forms is associated with this visit. In Cittor, the *Chattrī* (umbrella shaped temple of Ravidāsa, which stands near the Kumbhanśyāma Mandir, also supports the fact of his visiting the place. Contemporary sources are silent on the relationship of Jhālī with Mīrābāi. Some modern historians, on the basis of indirect references, have suggested their own solution to the problem of the relationship between the two. Hermann Goetz maintains that Queen Jhālī whose other name was Ratana Kunwara, is the mother of Rānā Sāṅgā. After the death of Bhoja Rāja, she becomes the protectress of Mīrā at Sāṅgā's court.⁴⁷ With regard to the meeting of Ravidāsa with Mīrā, Hermann Goetz identifies Ravidāsa with the wandering Bābā who gives Mīrā an idol when she is four years of age,

44. Hermann Goetz, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

45. *Ibid.*, p.11.

46. *Sri Bhaktamāla*, p. 477.

47. Hermann Goetz, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7. Regarding Jhālī he writes on pp. 28-29, *op. cit.*, "She had been a Jhāli princess, of the elder branch of the dyanasty until recently ruling over Dharangadra State in Saurashtra and then residing at Halvad. Ratan Kunwar's brothers Ajoji and Sajoji had been, expelled by the youngest, Ranoji, and had become Vassals of Rana sanga, Ajoji being slain in the massacre of Khanua, A.D 1527. The Jhāli queen, as a devout Vaishnava, of course knew Dwarka, and as a disciple of the social reformer Raidāsa was also familiar with the reform activities of Nar Singh Mehta (A.D. 1414-1481) the great Krishna bhakta and poet of Saurashtra. From her Mira may have been inspired to some of her actions by her model."

and traces Mīrā's direct source of teachings to another disciple of Ravidāsa; viz. Jhālī queen.⁴⁸

Bhakhasīdāsa in his *Rāmāyāna* maintains that Ravidāsa meets Mīrābāi and Kamāli (the daughter of Kabīra) at Panghata and initiates her into the spiritual life.⁴⁹ But in the opinions of Barkat Singh Anand⁵⁰ and Variyāma Singh Candhrā⁵¹ she is initiated by him at Kāśī when she pays a visit to him. The *Premābodha*, also suggests that Mīrābāi is initiated when she comes to see Ravidāsa at Kāśī.⁵² In the absence of historical evidence, no final word can be said regarding the time and place of Mīrā's meeting with Ravidāsa, but the fact of her being initiated by Ravidāsa as is known from her own hymns cannot be rejected without sound evidence to the contrary.

The dates of Mīrā's birth and of her marriage with Bhoja Rāja, the elder son of Rānā Sāngā, have been accepted by most modern scholars as 1498 and 1516 A.D. Mīrā, therefore, lived during the first half of the sixteenth century. However, her period may be extended to the third quarter of the sixteenth century if her meeting with Akbar (1542-1605 A.D.) is a historical fact.

Sikandar Lodhi

There is not much controversy regarding the period of the reign of Sikander Lodhi. He was the king of Delhi from 1498 to 1517 A.D.

On the basis of the dates mentioned above, we may attempt to establish the times of Ravidāsa. The traditional accounts, both primary and secondary do not make any direct

48. Hermann Goetz, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

49. Bhakhasīdāsa, *op. cit.*, p. 181-83.

50. Barkat Singh Ananda, *op. cit.*, p. 154-55.

51. Variyāma Singh Candhrā, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

52. मीरा बाई राज दुमारी ॥ खिस्त डगड परमहितारी ॥

तिस साय मैंग बी दिछा हेई ॥ रविदास पास चलिअर्दी मैर्दी ॥

उके चरन जाए तिन पकरे ॥ खुनमे स्थिपु नगर के सरारे ॥

जषि चमार दीर्घिआ कुषि देई ॥ उषि दिज नाम कहाउ के लेई ॥

दिह अनीउ देखि दुख पावहि ॥ हैंदि सरमिदे मर मर जावहि ॥ 61 ॥

references regarding the specific dates of his birth and activities. We find a fairly early tradition concerning the date of his birth. The *Pūrnimā* (full-moon day) of the month of *Māgha* (February-March) is celebrated as the birthday of the saint by almost all of his followers associated with various *gaddīs* (religious seats) of the *Pantha*.⁵³ The *Ravīdāsa Rāmāyana* further maintains that he is born on *Ravivāra* (Sunday) and his name is also believed to be derived from *Ravī* (literally sun) which provides him with the ancestry of the sun i.e. *suryabansi*.⁵⁴ On the basis of the above tradition then, he is born on Sunday on the full-moon day of the month of *Māgha*; beyond this we do not find any specific clue in the early extent sources, which are insufficient and incomplete as far as the problem of dating of *Ravidāsa* is concerned.

Nevertheless, some modern scholars attempt to assign a date of birth on the basis of these traditions. According to *Rāmacarana Kurīla* his date of birth is *Samvata* 1471 (1414 A.D.). He further holds that *Ravidāsa* lived till the old age of 126 years and died in *Samvat* 1597 (1540 A.D.).⁵⁵ *Salkudāsa* and *Rāmadāsa*, two of the heads of the religious seats of *Ayodhyā* and *Farrukhābāda* respectively, also suggest *Samvata* 1471 (1414 A.D.) as the date of the birth of *Ravidāsa*.⁵⁶ *Gobind Triguṇāyāta* also accepts the above date because the *māghapurnimā* falls on Sunday in that year.⁵⁷ *Rāmānanda Sāstrī*,⁵⁸ however, argues that *Dhannā* the follower of *Rāmānanda* born in *Samvata* 1472 (1415 A.D.) was younger than *Ravidāsa*. *Ravidāsa* is a few years elder than *Kabīra*, born in *Samvata* 1455-56 (1398-1399 A.D.). Following the above argument, *Rāmānanda Sāstrī* holds that *Ravidāsa* is born a few years before *Samvata* 1455-56 in the year when *māghapurnima* falls on a Sunday. *Ravidāsa*, he maintains is not older than

53. *Rāmānanda Sāstrī* & *Virendra Pāndey*, *op. cit.*, p. 84; *Gobinda Triguṇāyāta*, *op. cit.*, p. 32; *Acārya Prithvī Singh Azāda*, *op. cit.*, Introduction(5).

54. *Bakhasidāsa*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

55. *Rāmacarana Kurīla Bhagavāna Ravidāsa Kī Satya Kathā*.

56. *Ramananda Sāstrī* and *Virendra Pāndey*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

57. *Gobinda Triguṇāyāta*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

Kabīra more than fifteen years. He therefore suggests that the year between Samvata 1441 and 1455 (1384 and 1398 A.D.) when *māghapurnima* falls on Sunday is the year of his birth. But he does not inform us whether or not *māghapuranima* actually falls on Sunday during these years. Ravidāsa, according to him, lives to be as 130 years and dies somewhere between Samvata 1577 and 1595 (1520-1538 A.D.)⁵⁸

Acārya Prithvī Singh Azāda has suggested Samvata 1433 (1376 A.D.) as the date of Ravidāsa's birth. His contention is based on a *dohā* from the *Sākhi Samgrah*, attributed to Bhakta Ravidāsa and supposedly compiled by Karamadāsa in the early eighteenth century.⁵⁹ According to Azāda, the same date of birth is given in another manuscript copy of the *Sākhis* apparently compiled by Premadāsa in Samvata 1790 (1733 A.D.).⁶⁰ Bhakta Ravidāsa, therefore, according to Azāda lives to the ripe old age of 151 years.⁶¹

From the foregoing, it may be noticed that the scholars are not in agreement regarding the era of Ravidāsa. In the absence of strong evidence, we cannot form a final opinion resolving the controversy. The argument based on mere tradition is too weak to stand the test of rigorous historical criticism. Besides, there is more than one traditions each claiming to be the earliest and hence the one containing the truth. However, on the basis of the relationship of Bhakta Ravidāsa with other saints, which we have discussed above at some length, we may assume that he lived between Samvata 1450 and 1583 (1393-1526 A.D.). These dates make him younger than Rāmānanda (1375-1475 A.D.) contemporary to Kabīra (1398-1581 A.D.), older contemporary of Dhannā (b. 1415 A.D.), and Mīrābāī (1498-1575 A.D.).

58. Rāmānanda Sāśtriāand Virendra Pāndey, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-85.

59. Acārya Prithvī Singh Azāda, *Ravidāsa Darśana*. Introduction Following *dohā* is given by Azāda.

ਹੇਠ ਹੈ ਤੇਜਿਸ ਕੀ ਮਾਘ ਸੁਦੀ ਪ੍ਰਦਾਸ
ਦੁਖੀਓਂ ਕੇ ਕਲਿਆਣ ਹਿਤ, ਪਗਟੇ ਸ੍ਰੀਰਵਿਦਾਸ ॥

60. ਸਾਹੀਆਂ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਕੀ ॥ ਜਉ ਕਲਹਾਨੀ ਜੀਵੇਂ ਕੇ ਨਿਸਤਰਣ ਅਤ
ਮੇਖ ਹੇਤੁ ਮਾਘ ਪੂਰਣਿਮਾ ਸੰਵਤ 1433 ਵਿਕਮੀ ਕੁ ਕਾਸੀ ਛਿਗ ਮੰਨ੍ਹਰ
ਗਾਵ ਮਹਿ ਜਲਮ ਧਾਰਤ ਭਏ ॥ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਕੁਲ ਜਨਮੇ ਦਾਸਾਨੁ ਦਾਸ,
ਪ੍ਰੇਮਦਾਸ ਨੇ ਮਾਘ ਪੂਰਣਿਮਾਂ 1790 ਕੁ ਨਿਜ ਲੇਖਨੀ ਸ੍ਰਿਤਾਰਾ ਸਮਾਪਤ ਕੀਨਹੇ ॥

61. Acārya Prithvī Singh Azāda, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

Parentage

The primary sources do not give any clear evidence regarding the question of the parentage of Ravidāsa. The secondary sources give the names of his parents and family but they do not agree with each other. According to Bakhasidāsa, Ravidāsa belongs to the *cambara* family of the *camāras*.⁶² The names of his grandfather and grandmother are Hariyānanda and Cattar Kaur, and the names of his father and mother are Rāhū and Karmā.⁶³ In *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* the name of his father is given as Mānadāsa.⁶⁴ The editor of *Ravidāsa jī kī Bāñī* gives Raghū and Ghurabinia as the names of his parents.⁶⁵ According to *Ravidāsa Līlā*, Santokha and Kalsi are the names of his father and mother.⁶⁶ This account also associates Ravidāsa with the *cambara* family. The same names as in *Ravidāsa Līlā* occur in the *Janama Sākhī* of Ravidāsa with a slight difference. Similarly, the *Janama Sākhī* gives Santokha and Konsadevi as the names of his parents.⁶⁷

It may be noticed from the above accounts that no two important sources give the same version of the names of his parents. Of all these texts *Ravidāsa Rāmāyaṇa* is said to be the earliest text. Scholars therefore tend to accept these names (Rāhū and Karmā) as the most authentic.

Place of Birth

Like all the other details of his life we know very little regarding the place of the saint's birth. The only reference that we find in his hymns is :

My trade is dressing and cutting leather and daily removing dead cattle round about Banaras.⁶⁸

The verse does not clearly state whether he is born in Banārasa or at some other place near Banārasa.

62. Bakhasidāsa, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

63. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

64. *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, Sloka 53.

65. Ravidāsa Jī Kī Bāñī, p. 1

66. Variyāma Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 14

67. Barkat Singh Ananda, *op. cit.*, p. 16

68. *Gurūgranthasāhīh*, Malār Ravidāsa, p. 1293

Anantadāsa in his *Parcī* maintains that he is born in Banārasa.⁶⁹ Pariyadāsa's commentary also seems to suggest Banārasa as his place of birth.⁷⁰ Bakhasidasa maintains that Ravidāsa lives in Śūdra colony, called Madur which is situated near Kāśī.⁷¹ According to this account not only Ravidāsa but his parents⁷² and grandparents⁷³ also inhabit the same village.

Claims also have been made by his followers in Rājasthān and Gujarāt that Ravidāsa is born in their respective states. But their argument on the basis of a large following of Ravidāsa in those states and his association with some of the places there, such as Ravidāsa Kī *Chattrī* near Kumbhanāśyāma temple in Cittor and *Ravidāsa kuṇḍ* (tank) and *kutī* (hut) at Madogarha in Dhara State of Rājasthān is weak in comparison with the above accounts based on the verses of Ravidāsa and the early tradition. The *chattrī*, the *kutī* and the *kuṇḍ* may have been built in order to perpetuate the memory of his visits to these places. So it seems likely that Banārasa is his place of birth.

In Banārasa itself there are two big and old colonies inhabited by the śūdras which are claimed as the birth place of the saint. The first of these two is Seera Goverdhanapura, situated close to Banārasa Hindū University. According to tradition, an old tree at this place, whose trunk still stands there, is associated with Ravidāsa. Now the late Santa Haridāsājī of Ballān village in Jullundur district of Punjāb has built there a four-storey temple in memory of Ravidāsa.

Another place which is claimed as the birth place of the saint is Madhuādih. This place is situated on the G.T. Road

69. Anantadāsa, *op. cit.*

70. *Srī Bhaktamāla*, p. 473

71. बास्ती पुरी निकट मह पामा ॥ संकर बसै पुरु स नामा ॥

Bakhasidāsa, *op. cit.*, p. 23

बास्ती पास महूर अमधाना ॥ सदूर वरण करत गुजराना ॥

Bakhasidāsa, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

72. His father tells us of his place :

बास्ती पुर ते भुलियाम हमारा ॥

73. His grandfather also says :

बास्ती नगर निकट मह ग्रामा ॥ सुंदर दिवज घने मह पामा ॥

Ibid. p. 11

some one and a half miles to the west of Banārasa Cantonmemt. This village is comparatively larger and older than to Seer Goverdhanpura. It is still inhabited by *sūdras* (*Harijanas*). Lahartāra, the place associated with Bhakta Kabīra, is part of this village. There was an old tank and a temple believed to be built by Ravidāsa, but now they have been destroyed and only a raised mound can be seen. Every year in the month of Māgha a big fair is held at this place to celebrate the birthday of Ravidāsa.

As far as the strong local tradition and the view of *Ravidāsa Rāmāyana* is concerned, Maduādih is his birthplace. However, in the absence of some strong historical evidence, this assumption cannot be insisted upon. Seera Goverdhanpura may also be one of the many places associaated with Ravidāsa such as Gopāla Mandira, Panca Gaṅgā Ghāṭa, Dasasamundaghāṭa, Maidāgina Chauk, Gurū Bāgha, Lotan Bīra, Visvanātha Mandira and Kabīra Chaurā.

Caste and Profession

Ye city men (clever men), I am notoriously a tanner by caste,
 But in my heart I meditate on God.
 If wine be made even with Ganges Water,
 You holy men will not drink it;
 But if wine which is impure, or other liquid be put into Ganges
 Water, the latter will not be altered.
 The Palmyra palm-tree, *sirs*, is admittedly
 impure, as its leaves are also deemed;
 But if God's words be written thereon, men will
 worship it and bow before it.
 My trade is dressing and cutting leather and daily
 removing dead cattle round about Banaras.
 Yet prominent Brahmanas now prostrate themselves
 before me, since I, the slave.
 Ravidāsa, have sought the shelter of Thy name, O God.⁷⁴

This perhaps is the only aspect of the life of the saint, regarding which not even the slightest doubt is entertained in any corner. Almost all the primary and secondary sources agree that he is a *sūdra* by caste and his profession is that of a cob-

74. *Guru Granthasāhib*, Malār, Ravidāsa, p. 1293.

bler, and this facet of his life is discussed in great detail. In fact, the whole of his life is viewed from this particular angle. The reason for this emphasis seems to be the Brāhmaṇic institution of *varṇāśramadharma* according to which the *śūdras* have no right to study the sacred scriptures, to perform sacrifices or to take initiation into religious life. Ravidāsa is a saint of such high and rare merits that even the *brāhmaṇas*, the men of exalted standing, come to pay their respects to him. The writers not only emphasize this particular aspect but also give their own reactions to the paradox of a *śūdra* attaining the spiritual status of a saint, thus making it difficult to adapt him to the *varṇadharma* scheme of life.

In his verses Ravidāsa emphatically maintains that he belongs to the *śūdra* caste and by his devotion to God and the grace of the Lord he is raised to the highest spiritual realms. In these verses the saint emphatically though humbly asserts the *śūdra*'s right to the freedom of worship, which unfortunately is denied to them. The accounts of Ravidasa written from the *Brāhmaṇical* point of view attempt to fit Ravidāsa into the above scheme of, *varṇadharma* by providing him with a higher *varṇa* in his previous life. We have earlier seen in the accounts of Priyadāsa and Anantadāsa that how they make him a *brāhmaṇa* in his previous life and that he is cursed to be born in a low caste family.⁷⁵

The aim of these legends, as Briggs points out, may be to give him a socially respectable ancestry.⁷⁶ We do not clearly know the intentions of the writers, but attempting to take Ravidāsa out of his socio-religious class is a moral offence against the *śūdras* and *camāras* on the part of these writers. The implication is that everything connected with the *śūdras* and with those who have dealings with them is impure, and therefore they are unworthy of making offerings to God. Also to be born in a *śūdra* family is a curse. Certain scholars claiming to be advocate of the *śūdra* class, still lay great emphasis

75. *Śrī Bhaktamāla*, p. 471.

76. G.W. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

on Ravidāsa's so-called *Brāhmaṇical* heritage. But *śūdras* as we learn from the verses of Ravidāsa are in no way inferior to any class as far as the question of God-realization is concerned. Initiation

In the verses of Ravidāsa we do not find any reference to the name of his spiritual guide; however, all the secondary sources maintain that he is initiated into the spiritual life by Svāmī Rāmānanda. In these accounts the problem of his initiation is linked with the problem of his caste. According to the *brāhmaṇic* laws, it is not possible for a *brāhmaṇa* to initiate a *śūdra* into the spiritual life. In the *brāhmaṇic* accounts, therefore, the story of his initiation by Rāmānanda is justified by associating him with Rāmānanda in his previous life. In the commentary of Priyadāsa, Rāmānanda initiates the child at the time of his birth.⁷⁷ According to *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* Ravidāsa already becomes a renowned religious figure, before he goes to seek initiation from Rāmānanda. He defeats Kabīra in a religious dialogue but having been defeated by Śaṅkrachārya, he then comes to Rāmānanda.⁷⁸ The *Ravidāsa Rāmāyana* also tells us that Ravidāsa is mature when he comes in contact with Rāmānanda. Taking into account the periods of Rāmānanda and Ravidāsa it is possible that Ravidāsa comes in contact with Rāmānanda at the age of twenty or more, when he had achieved a reputation as a great devotee of God.

Early Life

Ravidāsa, as is clear from his verses, does not renounce the worldly life and his profession in order to lead a religious life. Outwardly he always keeps himself busy in his profession, but inwardly he always remains immersed in devotion to God. It is quite possible that Ravidāsa never had any traditional religious education. From his hymns it is clear he feels such learning gives rise to pride in man, who comes to regard himself great *pandit* (learned) and a *gyāṇī* (knower).⁷⁹ The feeling of egoism is the greatest obstacle in the way of God-

77. *Srī Bhaktamāla*, p. 473.

78. *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, Part IV, chapters 17-18 and *śloks* 53-56.

79. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Rāmkalī, Ravidāsa, pp. 973-74.

realization. The real learning, according to Ravidāsa comes in the company of holy men, and through the word of the *gurū*. Such learning consists in training one's inner faculties to follow the path of God.⁸⁰ This method of learning is elaborately discussed in his verses. It is this learning that Ravidāsa himself acquires and prescribes for his disciples. Ravidāsa as we know starts waiting on saints from an early age, and later on he comes in contact with Svāmi Rāmānanda, these are the primary sources of his learning.

When Ravidāsa is young, his father arranges his marriage, but finding him unprofitable in the family business he turns him out of the house. His father has considerable wealth but does not give him anything. Ravidāsa builds his own hut and starts living there with his wife, earning his livelihood by making shoes.⁸¹ The small amount of money that he saves out of his meagre income, he spends in the service of saintly persons. He gratuitously supplies holy men with pairs of shoes whenever he finds them without any. Even in this period of abject poverty, he leads a very contented and devoted life. The legend of God's visit to him in the semblance of a saint, and leaving with him a *pārasa* (philosopher's stone), relates to this period of his life.

His devotion to God increases with his age. We find an interesting account in *Premābodha* of his absolute surrender and his intense devotion to God. His devotion bears fruit for him and he is blessed with the vision of God.⁸² In his commentary Priyadāsa also refers to Ravidāsa's realization of

80. ਚਲ ਮਨ ਹਰਿ ਟਕਸਾਲ ਪੜਾਉਂ ॥ ਟੇਕ ॥

ਗੁਰੂ ਕੀ ਸਾਟਿ ਗਿਆਨ ਕਾ ਅਛਰ ਬਿਸਰੇ ਤੇ ਸਹਜ ਸਮਾਧਿ ਲਗਾਉਂ ॥ 1 ॥

ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਕੀ ਪਾਟੀ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਕੀ ਲੇਖਣਿ ਰਰੇ ਮਮੇ ਲਿਖਿ ਆਂਕ ਲਖਾਉਂ ॥ 2 ॥

ਯੇਹਿ ਵਿਧਿ ਮੁਕਤ ਭਾਏ ਸਨਕਾਦਿਕ ਹੁਦਾਯ ਬਿਚਾਰ ਪ੍ਰਕਾਸ ਦਿਖਾਉਂ ॥ 3 ॥

ਕਾਗਦ ਕੰਵਲ ਮਤਿ ਮਸਿ ਕਰਿ ਨਿਰਮਲ ਬਿਨਾ ਰਸਨਾ ਨਿਸਦਿਨ ਗੁਨ ਗਾਉਂ ॥ 4 ॥

ਕਹ ਰੈਦਾਸ ਰਾਮ ਭਰੁ ਭਾਈ ਸੰਤ ਸਾਖਿ ਦੇ ਬਹੁਰਿ ਨ ਆਉਂ ॥ 5 ॥

81. *Sri Bhaktamāla*, p. 474.

82. ਇਕ ਦਿਨ ਮਨ ਚਿਤ ਬੁੰਧ ਥਕ ਗਈ ॥ ਦੇਹ ਭੀਤ ਕੇ ਚਿਤੁ ਸੋਤਈ ॥ 25 ॥

ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਮਗਨ ਮਨ ਮੂਰਛਤ ਬਧਿ ਅਹੰਕਾਰ ਅਉਚਿਤੁ ॥

ਗਲਤ ਮਹੋਦਧਿ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਮਹਿ ਤਨਿ ਜਿਉ ਭੀਤ ਕੇ ਚਤੁ ॥ 26 ॥

God.⁸³ God in this account, first comes in the guise of a saint and then appears again in a dream and gives him gold coins with which he builds a temple for the service of the holy men and the worship of God. From then onwards, his reputation as a realized soul spreads through the length and breadth of the country.

Later Life

From his own verses and from the account of Nābhādāsa two periods of his life are clearly discernible. The first period is the period of his *sādhnā* (spiritual endeavours) when he is laughed at by the people for his poverty and for his claim to the right of worshipping God. The *brāhmaṇas* put obstacles in the way of devotion because he is born in a low *sūdra* caste.⁸⁴ But in his later life, after spiritual realization, his reputation as a great saint spreads. It is during this period that even the *brāhmaṇas*, leaving aside their caste distinctions come to bow before him.⁸⁵ Ravidāsa humbly acknowledges that this transformation in his life is due to the all-embracing grace of God.

Who but Thee, my Jewel, could do such a thing?
 Cherisher of the poor, Lord of the earth;
 Thou hast put over my head the umbrella
 of spiritual sovereignty.

(Footnote continued from previous page)

अंतरि पैम सिद्धि नैन उपारे ॥ पैम अंतरि दिस निहारे ॥
 मेई पैम तिभवण सार ॥ निर्वार वह सरष आवार ॥
 अंतरि जोउ सरुप पूकासा ॥ तीन भवण भीर तचा बासा ॥
 मेषे पत सै ने रूप दिखाइआ ॥ मुनि से रूप दिसिट भाहि आइआ ॥
 मेई से रूप विहि बहरि आहिच ॥ दरमन देखि चरनीं लपटाइ ॥ 27 ॥
 ठाकुर उष पूर्मि बिहिर रविदास से भागहु लेहु ॥
 गिरि निरि नषु निरिय मड ले सुख भेगा बरहु ॥

83. *Srī Bhaktamāla*, pp. 475-76.

84. दरिद्रु देखि सर के हसै औसी दमा हमारी ॥

Gurūgranthasāhib, Bilāvala, Ravidāsa, p. 858.

85. भेरी जाउ बुट्टाच्छाला ढो ढोईता नितहि बनारसी आस पासा ॥

अष चिपु परपान तिहि बरहि डंडूडि तेरे नामि मरणाइ रविदास दासा ॥

Gurūgranthasāhib, Malāra, Ravidāsa, p. 1293.

दारनामरम अजिमान उजि पट रज बंदहि जास की ॥

Srī Bhaktamāla, p. 470

Thou relentest towards him whose touch defileth the world;
 The lowly dost Thou exalt, my God, and none dost Thou fear.
 Namdev, Kabīr, Trilochan, Sadhna and Sain were saved.
 Saith Ravidasa hear, saints through God everything is done.⁸⁶

It is perhaps during this later period of his life that he initiates Queen Jhālī of Cittor into the spiritual life. Some of his contemporary saints may also have visited him, for religious discourses, and it seems likely that he undertook extensive journeys, preaching the message of devotion to God.

During this period he pays a visit to Cittor on the invitation of his disciple *Jhālibāī*,⁸⁷ and even today the *Chattri* in Cittor, and the *kutī* and the *kuṇḍ* in Madogarh are associated with his name. He may well have visited these places also. As we learn from the commentary of Priyādāsa, Rāmānanda also pays a visit to Gagraun, the city of the saint Pīpā, accompanied by Kabīra and Raidāsa.⁸⁸ According to the *Ravidāsa Rāmāyaṇa* he visits all the places of pilgrimage and religious centres, such as Puśkara, Prayāga, Trivenī, Godāvarī River, Haridvāra, Multānpurī, Panghata.⁸⁹ At Panghata, during his meeting with Mīrābāī he discloses that he has come from Kāśī and wants to travel throughout the country.⁹⁰ According to another text *Prasanga Pariyāta*,⁹¹ Ravidāsa accompanies Rāmānanda as far as Kāñcī.

If these texts have a grain of truth, Ravidāsa travels extensively; but this aspect of his life is totally unknown. Interesting studies may be made in this direction. Ravidāsa's followers are found throughout Northern India, including for instance Rājasthān where his writings are preserved with great regard. This fact shows that he is quite popular in that part of the country and may well have visited or lived there for sometime.

86. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Māṭu, Ravidāsa, p. 1106.

87. *Śrī Bhaktamāla*, pp. 478-79.

88. *Ibid.*, pp. 495-96.

89. Bakhasidāsa; *op. cit.*, p. 81.

90. बासीपुर से चलकर आएिछ ॥

भारत भूमि हेतु मन लाएिछ ॥

Bakhasidāsa, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

91. As quoted by Badrī Nārāyana Śrivāstava, *op. cit.*, p. 10

The time and place of his death is also not known. The traditional accounts are obscure and unsatisfactory. In the absence of any authentic historical evidence, it may be assumed that he passes away at some unknown place during his extensive journeys to different parts of the country.

CHAPTER III

BHAKTI MOVEMENT BEFORE RAVIDĀSA

Ravidāsa as a saint, a religious teacher and a reformer is generally associated with a group of free thinking *sādhakas* (worshippers) and religious reformers, who flourished during the later medieval centuries in the Northern India. These *sādhakas* are variously called *bhaktas* or *santas*, and their tradition, the *bhakti* or the *santa* tradition. Because of their belief in *nirguna* God, some scholars prefer to call their school of thought 'the *nirguna* school'.¹

Most of these early *nirguna santas* are probably initiated into the spiritual life by Svāmi Rāmānanda, a great devotee, religious reformer and a teacher, who flourished during the first half of the fifteenth century. Traditional accounts maintains that Rāmānanda is a successor of Rāmānuja, the renowned twelveth century scholar of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava school of the South. If the tradition is to be honoured, it follows that Svāmi Rāmānanda is a follower of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava school of bhakti, and his followers represent the continuity of the bhakti school of the South. But as we shall presently see, such is not the case with the *santa* tradition.

In the following pages, we shall attempt to analyse what caused the transformation of the tradition of the Southern bhakti school and the development of the Northern *santa* school. A brief historical survey of the bhakti tradition from the early medieval centuries up to the rise of the *santa* tradition, and an account of the characteristic features of the *santa* tradition of the North will supply us with the religious background material against which, in the next chapter we shall attempt to study

1. Pitāmber Datt Barthwāl, *The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*; Gobind Triguṇāyata, *Hindi Kī Nirguna Kāvyadhārā*.

the religious beliefs of Bhakta Ravidāsa, one of the most important *santas* of the North.

In the religious history of India, the North occupies a place of great importance. From the earliest times all important religious systems including Bhāgavatism, Buddhism and Jainism originated in the North, and many of the important scriptures were composed there. But from the earlier medieval centuries the leadership and initiative in religious affairs passes from the North to the South, perhaps because of the social and political instability in the North. After the fall of Vardhana dynasty, the North India is divided into small principalities that remain engaged in constant warfare with each other. Invaders from the North West may also be one of the most powerful factors leading to this instability. The South, which becomes the new home of religious activities and reforms, is comparatively calm and peaceful—at least less disturbed by alien invaders. From the eighth to the thirteenth centuries the South was the leader in most reform movements and it is from the South that the spirit of reform is transmitted to the North through Svāmi Rāmānanda, a leading religious reformer of the later medieval centuries, who constitutes an important link between the South and the North.

The early medieval centuries in the South is a period of decline in Buddhism and Jainism, of revival and reformation in Hinduism and of development in the Śākta systems.² The causes of the downfall of Buddhism, according to R.C. Majumdar, are primarily the loss of royal patronage, but also the growth of debased *tantric* elements in which gross sensuality and carnal passions find a religious sanction, resulting in sexual immorality masquerading in the name of religion. The close rapprochement of the Mahāyāna Buddhism to Hinduism also proves fatal for their separate existence and leads to an assimilation of both into the broad stream of "Hinduism."³ In

2. J.N. Farquhar so much emphasizes this development that he prefers to call this period (A.D. 550-900) as the period of the Sākta Systems, see *op. cit.*, p 166.

3. R.C. Majumdar, "Evolution of Religio-Philosophic Culture in India" in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, p. 48.

addition to these causes, the revival of Hinduism itself is another significant factor in the decline of Buddhism. The rejuvenated Hinduism fights Buddhism on every level; Prabhākara and Kumārila fight on the ground of the Karma-Mimāsā, Śaṅkara fights on the ground of Jñāna Mimāsā the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva saints fight on the ground of bhakti.⁴ According to D.S. Sharma, these saints “sang Buddhism and Jainism out of their province.”⁵ The revived Hinduism, says Tara Chand is deeply indebted to these religions, which it attempts to supplant.⁶ Those elements of the “herterodox” religious systems that seem to be the basis of their universal appeal and widespread popularity are appropriated in the religious movements of the later period. The various developments in the religious history of the period are beyond the limited scope of our present survey, which is primarily concerned with the bhakti school, its historical development and transformation. In the bhakti school also our main emphasis will be the Vaiṣṇava school, of which the later *santa* tradition, is said to be a continuation.

The early medieval centuries in the religious history of India, then are characterized by the renaissance of Hinduism in general and of the bhakti movement in particular. The devotional fervour of the Śaiva Nayanāras (Śaiva leaders) and

4. J.N. Farquhar, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-69.

5. D.S. Sharma, *Hinduism through the Ages* (Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), p. 33.

6. “For they took over from Buddhism its devotionality, its sense of transitoriness of the world. Its conceptions of human worthlessness, its suppression of desires and asceticism as also its ritual the worship of idols and *stupas* or lingams temples, pilgrimages, fasts, and monastic rules, and its idea of the spiritual equality of all castes; from Jainism they took its ethical tone and its respect for animal life.” Tara Chand, *op. cit.* p. 87. Satkari Mookerjee also says, “After the disappearance of the Buddhist Church, which consisted of the monastic order, Buddhism, ceased to maintain its separate existence. But it has not, however become extinct either as a cult or as philosophy. It exists in the Hindu masses and classes totally assimilated and harmonized with the old religion. The old religion of the Vedas also does not exist in its pristine purity, and it has been metamorphosed into what is popularly called Hinduism which is a wonderful mosaic of which Buddhism, is as much an integral element as the old vedic culture.” Satkari Mookerjee, *Buddhism in Indian Life and thought in The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. I, 597.

Vaiṣṇava Ālvārs (Vaiṣṇava divers) is the main force behind the rising tide of bhakti in the South. The origins of these devotional sects supposedly go back to the pre-Vedic and Vedic periods respectively. In the centuries preceding the medieval period, these devotional sects undergo many changes. In the course of all these centuries they attempt to develop their own theologies and systems of worship, which continue changing with changes in the social and political milieu. But with the emergence the Nayanāras and the Ālvāras the bhakti movement enters into a decisive phase, and sectarian schools begin to take a definite shape. It is actually from these Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints, that the bhakti movement takes its roots.

The Nayanāras

The Nayanāras are the Śaiva *bhaktas*, who flourished between the seventh and tenth centuries in Tāmil. Traditionally their number is reckoned as sixty three. Some of them may belong to an earlier period, as Kannappa for instance, is said to belong to the first or second century A.D.⁷ These wandering saints compose hymns filled with devotion for Śiva.

The *Devaram*, the first of the collections of hymns held to be canonical by the Tāmil Śaivites, is composed between 600 and 800 A.D. and Nanasambandhar, Appar and Sundaramurti,⁸ is put together in one collection of 797 stanzas by Nambi Andar Nambi, about 1000 A.D.⁹ The eighth book of the canonical writings, entitled *Tiruvachakam* (sacred utterance) is written by the celebrated Manikya Vachaka. His date is disputed, however, he is placed between the late ninth and early tenth centuries by most scholars. His lyrical poems are regarded as gems, from the point of view of their contents, style, diction and mastery of meter. They are regarded as greater than the hymns of *Devaram*.¹⁰ It is said of the *Tiruvachakam*

7. S. Satchidanandam Pillai, 'The Saiva Saints of South India', in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. IV, p. 339.

8. J.N. Farquhar, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

9. F. Kingsbury and G.E. Phillips, *Hymns of the Tamil Saivite Saints* (London Oxford University, Press, 1921), p. 3.

10. F. Kingsbury and G.E. Phillips, p. 3.

that the heart that does not melt when hearing it, will never melt.¹¹ The ninth book contains songs of the *bhakta* Tirumular, and the eleventh consists of miscellaneous writings of the saints Nakkirar, Nambiandar and others.¹²

These eleven books, called *Tirumurai*, together with *Periya Purana* (a Śaiva hagiology), constitute the sacred lore of the Śaivas. Among the Tāmil Śaivas these hymns are regarded as more sacred than the Vedas, and are employed for all religious and ceremonial purposes. The images of some of Nayanāra saints can also be seen along with the images of Śiva in temples. "Taken as a whole," says Hopkins, "The hymns in the *Tirumurai* brought together the epic and *purāṇic* accounts of Śiva, local legends and stories of the saints own experiences at the temples and shrines of the Tamil area and teachings of Śaivite Agamas all infused with a spirit of emotional devotion. The hymns remained the favourite expression of popular devotion among Tamil Śaivites."¹³

It may be seen that the common theme of all these mystic poets is intense devotion towards Śiva, who is believed to be the highest of all gods. A certain concreteness in the conception of the deity may also be noticed : he is believed to be present in the images at particular temples, and it is to this form of the deity that most of the hymns are addressed.¹⁴ The saints of this line by writing and preaching in the language of the people bring religion to a level where everyone without consideration of caste distinction, has the freedom to worship. Later different theological schools such as the Śaiva Siddānta and Vira Śaivas develop among the Śaivites. Meanwhile, another parallel bhakti movement, develops among the Vaiṣṇavas.

The Ālvāras

The twelve Ālvāra saints are the Vaiṣṇava counterpart of the Śaiva Nayanāras. There is uncertainty regarding their

11. Sabapathy Kulandran, *Grace : A Comparative study of the Doctrine in Christianity and Hinduism* (London, Lutter-worth Press; 1964), p. 95.

12. Tara Chand, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

13. Thomas J. Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition* (California, Dickenson Publishing Company, 1971), p. 118.

14. Sabapathy Kulandarn, *op. cit.*, 195.

period and their chronological order, but they may roughly be placed between the sixth and ninth centuries A.D., since they appear to have flourished before the early Vaiṣṇava Acāryas (eleventh century).¹⁵ The Ālvāras include a king, a woman, a *brāhmaṇa*, a man of low caste and a repentant sinner.

Poygai, Bhutattar and Pey the three earliest Ālvāras are thought to be mythical. They are said to have composed one hundred stanzas each,¹⁶ addressed to the different *arcāvatāras* (manifestations of Viṣṇu) in various villages of Tamil. The fourth Ālvāra, Tirumalisai, is a great *bhakta* and *yogin* whose compositions *Namukham Tiruvandai* and *Tiruccandaviruttan* are illustrative of his singular devotion to Viṣṇu as an Ekāntika.¹⁷

The fifth saint, Nammalvār, is the greatest of the Vaiṣṇava saints. His four compositions the *Tiruviruttam*, the *Tiruvasiriyam*, the *Periya Tiruvandadi* and the *Tiruvaimoli* form the most important part of the *Nalayira Prabandham*, the canonical text of the Ālvāras. They are regarded as the “four Vedas” in Tamil garb.¹⁸ His poems are said to have exercised the greatest influence in shaping the conduct and faith of the Southern Vaiṣṇavas. “Nammalvar is called the *kutastha* by the later Acāryas of the Vaiṣṇadvaita system, because the fundamental doctrines of the Śri Vaiṣṇava faith as current today, were taught by him.”¹⁹ Madhurakavi was a disciple of Nammalvar, who apotheosized him and taught the Śri Vaiṣṇavas that devotion to a teacher and devotion to God are equal. Madhurakavi is even raised to the rank of the Ālvāras in the Vaiṣṇava tradition.

The next Alvara Kulasekhara is a king of Malabara. His contribution to the *Nalayira Prabandham* is a beautiful poem

15. Dines Chandra Sircar, ‘Early History of Vaiṣṇavism’, in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. IV, p. 143.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

17. V.Rangacārya, ‘Historical Evolution of Śri Vaiṣṇvism in South India’ in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. IV, p. 166: Ekāntika means ‘one-presence’, so named because of its dedication to a single deity to the exclusion of all others. Benjamin Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 176, Vol.II.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

19. *Ibid.*

entitled *Perumal Tirumoli*. It is also believed that the celebrated lyric *Mukundamala*, which in its harmony and beauty is compared to the *Gita-Govinda* is his work.²⁰ Another of the Ālvāra saints is Periyalvar, a *brāhamaṇa*. It is said that he miraculously conquered spiritual controversialists in the court of King Pandya and brought the king within the fold of Vaiṣṇavism.²¹ His poem *Tiruppallandu* describes his vision of Lord Viṣṇu in all glory, while he is participating in a procession organized by the king. The celebrated Goda or Andal, the only woman amongst the Ālvāras, is the adopted daughter of Viṣṇucitta (Periyalvar). She has 173 stanzas to her credit which are highly mystical.²² The next Ālvāra, Tondaradippodi is an abandoned sinner, who through the grace of God attains salvation. His two poems composed in praise of the Lord *Viṣṇu* are the *Tirumalai* and the *Tirup-pallie-elucci*. Tiruppanari, the next Ālvāras was a pariah, whose decade of verses known as the *Amalanadip-piran* is included in the *Prabandham*.²³

Tirumangai, the last of the canonical Ālvāras, was a Vellaha in the service of the Cola King. He composed six poems *Periya, Triumoli, Tirkkurundandakam, Tiruvelukurirkukai, Siriya Tirumadal* and *Periya Tirumandal*. It is the view of the Śri Vaiṣṇavas that the six compositions of Tirumangai are a form of logical supplement to the four poems of Nammalvar. In fact, the works of Nammalvar are conventionally regarded as the four Vedas, while those of Tirumangai as the six Vedāngas, and constitute the major portion of the 'Tāmil Veda', by which name the *Prabandham* is known to the Śri Vaiṣṇavas.²⁴

The religion of the Ālvāras is above all one of passionate devotion directed to the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. Their hymns also express intense devotion using stories from the epics and early *purāṇas*, they communicate their devotional fervour. The

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. Dines Chandra Sircar, *op. cit.*, o, 144.

23. Rangacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

love of the *gopīs* for Kṛṣṇa is a prototype of their own relationship to God. God is easily accessible to the devotee in the form of *avatāras* and *arcāvatāras* (manifestations of God in the images set up in temples), and complete self-surrender to the will of the Lord is the required response of the devotee. This way is open to all people, regardless of their religion, caste or status. In this way, the consolation of religion is extended to all classes of people, and this, in fact, is the chief contribution of the these Tamil *bhaktas* to the religious culture of India.

Thus the Ālvāras succeed in their attempt to set up a popular cult of devotion which is of equal validity as the upper class Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy. Because of this the *bhaktas* are regarded as the manifestation of the Lord's servants, weapons and ornaments. Their images are set up by the side of the images of Viṣṇu in the temples and they are worshipped along with him. But in the later period, in the age of the Acāryas (tenth or eleventh century), a synthesis between the passionate Tāmil devotion and Vedāntic orthodoxy is effected. With the emergence of these Acāryas the cult of these mystic saints is institutionalized.

The Rise of the Vaiṣṇava Acāryas

After the movement of Ālvāras reached at its summit, there follows a succession of Vaiṣṇava Acāryas (theological teachers). The main task of the Acāryas is to interpret the sacred hymns of the Ālvāras, to provide a secure philosophical basis for them and to organize the Śri Vaiṣṇava sect. The first of the Acāryas is Nāthamunī, the "founder" of the Acārya movement. His dates are disputed, but the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh centuries seem to be the most probable.²⁵ He compiles the hymns of the Ālvāras in a collection called *Nalavira Prabandham* (the book of four thousand hymns), which he sets to Drāvidian music and arranges for its regular singing at Śrirangama temple in Trichinopoly, where he resides.

The introduction of the singing of these devotional lyrics of the Ālvāras at the regular temple service is a most signifi-

25. J.N. Farquhar, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

cant event. Later on this practice comes to be followed in other important temples also. The Ālvāras, thus, owe a great debt to Nāthamunī, for introducing and popularizing their hymns and securing a respectable place for them in temple worship. From then onward, the hymns of the Ālvāras, composed in Tāmil are accorded the same status as the Vedas, hence the name 'Tāmil Veda' for *Nalavira Prabandham*. It is only after the introduction of the *Prabandham* into the temple worship that the images of the Ālvāras are set up by the side of the images of deity and they are also worshipped along with them.

Acārya Nāthamunī is an erudite scholar of the Vedas, Smritis and other scriptures.²⁶ Under him develops a combined school of Samskrit and Tāmil scholarship which attempts to reconcile the teachings of the Ālvāras with that of the Vedas, the *Brahmasūtras* and the *Bhāgavatgītā*. As a result of this endeavour a series of commentaries are prepared on *Prabandham* and a vast literature in Samskrit and Tāmil is produced.

Nāthamunī is succeeded by the Puṇḍarikakṣa and Rāma Miśra about whom very little is known. Yamunācārya, third in succession after Nāthamuni, is his grandson, a competent scholar who leaves several works of great significance. Yamunācārya perhaps is the first to lay down the lines on which Rāmānuja later builds his system of Visiṣṭadvaita.²⁷ His *Śri Catuhaśloki* is a poem of four stanzas on the position of Lakṣami as consort of Viṣṇu, and the part played by her in the soul's salvation. *Stotraratna*, a poem of seventy stanzas, is a composition in praise of the Lord, but actually it is an ardent praise of the doctrine a self-surrender. His *Siddhitraya* comprising three sections, Ātmasiddhi, Iśvarasiddhi and Samvitasiddhi, demonstrates the nature of the individual soul, the supreme Lord, and the relation between the soul and the object of perception. In *Samvitasiddhi* he refutes the doctrine of *avidyā* and absolute identity, which plays such a conspicuous part in the philosophy of Śamkara. In *Āgamapramāṇya* he

26. V. Ranagacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

establishes the orthodoxy of the Pāñcarātra school. In addition to the above mentioned works, all in Samskrit, he also writes *Mahāpuruṣa Nirṇaya* and *Gitārtha Saṃgarha*.

All these Acāryas argue against the monistic system of Śaṃkarācārya, which asserts that both the individual soul and the phenomenal world are the products of ignorance and illusion, and the apparent bondage, therefore, can only be removed by knowledge leaving no room for the exercise of love and piety in this world. The doctrine is antagonistic to the doctrine of bhakti, which implies a basic distinction between the *jīva* and God. The Acāryas, therefore, in their endeavour to establish the doctrine of bhakti seek to refute the position of Śaṃkara, with regard to his exposition of the philosophy of the *Upaniṣadas*.

Rāmānuja was the first Acārya to set up a full and critical exposition of Visiṣṭādvaita (qualified monism) to counteract Śaṃkara's doctrine of (monism) Advaitavāda. He is born in 1017 A.D. and spends his youth at Kāncīpura where he is a disciple of Yādavaprakāśa, an Advaitic philosopher, and therefore, professes spiritual monism. Rāmānuja, because of his inclinations towards Vaiṣṇavism, is dissatisfied with Yādavaprakāśa's teachings, which ultimately leads to his separation from him. Rāmānuja then applies to the study of the *Prabandhas* of the Ālvāras and absorbs their spirit. He succeeds Yāmunamunī as Acārya at Śrirangam and does his life's work there. He is said to have gone on pilgrimage to the famous holy places of Northern India. From A.D. 1098 to 1122, Rāmānuja takes refuge in Mysore under the king of Hoysala dynasty because of the persecution of the Vaiṣṇavas by the Cola king Kulottuyunga.²⁸ He succeeds there in winning over the Jaina prince to Vaiṣṇavism. The prince adopts the name of Viṣṇuardhana to mark his conversion. After the death of the Cola persecutor, Rāmānuja comes back to Śrirangama and dies there in 1137.²⁹ He leaves behind the following significant

28. J. N. Farquhar, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

29. *Ibid.*

works *Vedāntasāra*, *Vedāntadīpa*, *Vedārthasamgraha*, as well as commentaries on the *Brahmasūtra* and the *Bhāgavadgītā*.

Rāmānuja's Vedāntic theory is based on the texts of the Upaniṣadas and the *Brahmasūtras*. According to this theory there are three eternal principles : *cita* (individual or animal soul), *actita* (matter or insensate world) and the *Īśvara* (Supreme Soul). Of these three "ultimate realities", *Īśvara* alone is soul and Its relation to matter is similar to the relation of the soul to the body; God is the "soul" of souls and matter. It is not the external relation that governs them but the *aprthagkasiddhi* (internal relation of inseparability).³⁰ The relation of inseparability is the pivot on which the Visiṣṭadvaita philosophy turns. Souls and matter are distinct from God but they are inseparable. God is qualified by the world of souls and matter. The souls and matter constitute the body of God and thus they form one Reality. God, Who is identified with Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa, is endowed with all the auspicious qualities of knowledge, power, bliss and so on.³¹ He is eternal and pervades all living and non-living things and is their internal controller. He is the creator, protector and destroyer of the world. God is possessed of a wonderful celestial body of unsurpassable beauty and has for his consorts Lakṣmi, Bhū (the earth) and Līlā (sport). The *Vibhāva* *Īśvara* appears in five different modes—*paravyūha*, *vibhāva*, *antaryāmin* and *arcā*. Before the creation, the Supreme Soul exists in a subtle form, and when the creation takes place he develops in the form of existing universe, thus he is the material cause of the external world. He is also the efficient cause of the creation because the creation comes into being by his will.

The individual soul has some attributes, such as self-consciousness and knowledge in common with the Supreme Soul. It is "self-illuminated, joyous, eternal, atomic, imperceptible to the senses, unthinkable, devoid of parts, unchangeable, the substratum of knowledge, subject to God's control, depending on

30. T.M.P.Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism*. (Bombay, Chetana Ltd., 1966) p. 151.

31. *Ibid*, p. 152.

God's existence for his own existence and (is) an attribute of God."³² The souls are infinite in number. They are of three classes—*nitya* (eternal) which are never in bondage, *mukta* (liberated) which have attained liberation : and *bandha* (bound) which are caught up in the vortex of *samsāra*. The liberated souls dwell in Vaikuṇṭha (heaven) in the presence of Pārabrahman and even at this state they maintain their distinctiveness.

It has already been noted above that Rāmānuja aims at reconciling popular Vaiṣṇavism with Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy and at validating of devotion as a way of release. The way of liberation for him, therefore, is the way of *bhakti*. Since bondage is real, it cannot be ended by knowledge alone, cessation of bondage can come only through the grace of God, pleased by the devout meditation of the worshipper.³³

The mode of *bhakti* that Rāmānuja seeks to defend is close to the bhakti of the *Bhāgavadgītā* and of the early Pāñcarātra tradition of the epics, then to the emotional bhakti of the Ālvāras. *Karma* (action) and *Jñāna* (knowledge) are necessary preliminaries for this mode of bhakti. *Karma* is the performance of all the acts, rites, and ceremonies, such as worship of the deity, practice of austerities, pilgrimages to holy places, charity and sacrifices. If performed without any concern for reward, *Karma* purifies the soul and leads to the acquisition of *Jñāna*.

The *jñāna* consists in seeing oneself as distinct from *prakṛti* (matter) and as an attribute of God Himself. *Jñānayoga* leads to bhakti. The doctrine of bhakti in Rāmānuja's system is more an *upāsnā* (continuous meditation on God) than an unbounded love for God, as it is commonly understood in the Ālvāra tradition, although the meditation that he enjoins, naturally implies a feeling of love.³⁴ This mode of *bhakti* is open only to the upper three orders of society and not to the *śūdras*

32. Cf. Sir R.G. Bhandarkar, *op. cit.*, p 54.

33. Thomas, J. Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition* (California, Dickenson Publishing Co. 1971), p. 122.

34. Sir R.G. Bhandarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

and other outcastes. Concomitant with this practice of bhakti, Rāmānuja strictly maintains the duties of *Varnāśrama dharma*. Passionate devotion accompanied by self-surrender as taught by the Ālvāras is held to be a valid path of liberation, but it is mainly for the *sūdras* and others, who according to the caste rules cannot be initiated into the path of bhakti which is restricted to the three higher classes of the society. Rāmānuja, thus fully maintain all the restrictions of the orthodox *brāhmaṇas*.

As a result of the distinction made between the doctrine of bhakti and *prapatti* (self surrender) two schools develop in Tāmil Vaiṣṇavism, Vadakalai (Northern learning) and Tenkalai (Southern learning). The Vadakalai school emphasizes the importance of the sacred language of Samskrit, the doctrine of Bhakti and caste distinctions. The Tenkalai school, close to the tradition of the Ālvāras, maintains that the Tāmil language is as sacred as any other language for religious purposes. They also asserted that *prapatti* is the only path to liberation, and are against imposing any restrictions on the *sūdras* and others in religious matters. They are more liberal than the Vadakalai school and caste distinctions for them are irrelevant in the observance of religious practices.

The characteristic feature of the early Acārya movement is that they recognize bhakti as a valid path of release, but at the same time, allow Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy to reassert itself.

From the South, the movement of bhakti gradually spreads to other parts of the country. The freshness of the devotional fervour of the movement is preserved by the saints who arise among the common men in different regions, and who compose devotional hymns in the language of the common masses. The tradition of the Vaiṣṇava Acāryas is carried furtheer by Mādhva, Nimbārka, Vallabha and others.

Mādhava (1199-1278 A.D.) whose activities are chiefly confined to the Mālābāra coast, propounds the theory of *dvaitavāda* (dualism). The concept of *bheda* (difference) is

central to his philosophy. God, world and souls are real, but the world and the souls are dependent on God. God, whom he identifies with Hari, is independent. Liberation consists in the souls' enjoyment of the innate bliss.³⁵ Bhakti is the means to the attainment of bliss. The souls maintain their individuality even in the state of liberation. The Mādhava's bhakti is considerably influenced by the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. However, the cow-herd element of Kṛṣṇa is less emphasized here and Rādhā is altogether ignored in his system.

In Northern India, Nimbārka is the first to put the Vaiṣṇava bhakti on a philosophical basis. His philosophy seems to be compromise between that of Rāmānuja and Mādhava.³⁶ He believes God to be both identical with and distinct from the individual souls. Souls and matter are disntinct from Brahman in the sense that they have a distinct existence. They are non-different in the sense that they have no independent existence.³⁷ His chief difference from Rāmānuja lies in substituting the old pure bhakti for *Upāsanā* (meditation) and in giving prominence to the elements of Kṛṣṇa is further developed by Caitanya and his followers.

The Transformation of the Southern Bhakti

The popular form of the bhakti based on Mādhava's system is to be noticed in the Dāsa Kuta movement or the order of the Vaiṣṇava psalmists and saints of Karanataka. The Dāsa's (servant of the God) are a regular band of devotees dedicated to the service of the Lord, who wandered from one end of the country to another singing the praises of Hari. These saints centre their affections on Viṭṭhala of Pāndharpura, the patron deity of their order.³⁸ The saints of Karnātaka are thus first to develop the cult of devotion to Viṭṭhala and it is from these saints that the example subsequently is taken up and carried

35. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

36. R.C. Majumdar, "Evolution of the Religio-Philosophic Culture in India" *op. cit.*, p. 55.

37. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

38. B.N.K. Sharma, 'The Vaisnava Saints of karanataka' in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. IV, p. 394.

further by the saints of Mahārāstra.³⁹ Pāndharpura, a famous religious centre, once under the cultural sway of Karanātaka, later comes under the political and cultural hegemony of Mahārāstra.

In subsequent centuries, the movement of bhakti spreads to the whole of Northern India. Two main groups among the bhaktas of the North can be clearly distinguished in terms of their object of devotion. The first group concentrates its affections on Kṛṣṇa, the second group makes Rāma the object of worship. The religious centre for Kṛṣṇa worshippers is Vrindāvana, whereas Kāśī, is the centre for Rāma worshippers.

The credit of transmitting the doctrine of bhakti from the South to the North and providing it new impetus is given to Rāmānanda in the popular tradition and also in some of the traditional accounts.⁴⁰ Scholars disagree regarding the place of birth of Svāmi Rāmānanda.

Macauliffe says that he was born in the South at Maikot where Rāmānuja his spiritual predecessor had set up an idol of Visnu and induced the *brāhmaṇas* to renounce their devotion to *Siva*.⁴¹ Farquhar is also inclined to believe that Rāmānanda belongs to the Rāmaite sect of the Vaiṣṇavas in the South, who later on came to the North, settled in Kāśī and preached the doctrine of salvation through Rāma.⁴² He is the founder of Rāmaavata movement in the North, and is thus the first to introduce in the North the name of Rāma as a deity. This fact is also beyond dispute that a small sect within the Śri Vaiṣṇavas is at that time already in existence in the South, which finds release in the worship of Rāma.⁴³ The favourite deity of Kulasekhara Ālvāra is also Rāma, the son of Daśaratha.⁴⁴

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 349-50.

40. Baldeva Upādhyaya is of the opinion that it was Svāmī Rāghavānanda, spiritual predecessor and Gurū of Rāmānanda who actually had brought the doctrine of bhakti from the South, *op. cit.*, pp. 243-44.

41. M.A. Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, Vol. VI, p. 100.

42. J.N. Farquhar, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 249-51.

44. R.G. Bhandarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

While all traditions agree that Rāmānanda is closely associated with the Śri Vaiṣṇava movement of Rāmānuja, the question remains whether or not Rāmānanda preaches the same doctrine of bhakti as he is believed to have inherited from Rāmānuja. Historical and literary evidence does not provide a clear answer to this question. As has already been noted above very little is known regarding the person and the ideas of Svāmi Rāmānanda. The authorship of several works is attributed to him, but the dispute regarding their authenticity is not yet settled. Badrinārāyaṇa Śrivāstava accepts *Sri Vaiṣṇavamatābajbhāskara* and *Sri Rāmārcana paddhati* as the works of Svāmi Rāmānanda.⁴⁵ The first of these texts consists of one hundred and ninety-two *padas*, written in the form of a dialogue between Svāmi Rāmānanda and his disciple Sursurānanda. It attempts to answer ten questions on doctrines and the practices of the Śri Vaiṣṇavas. The *Rāmārcanapaddhati* is written in Sanskrit and it briefly states the various modes for the worship of Śri Rāma.⁴⁶ In addition to these works, Pitāmbardatt Baṛthwāl has edited some Hindi compositions supposed to be Rāmānanda's but their authenticity is also disputed. The only hymn of Rāmānanda that seems to be authentic is preserved in the *Gurūgranthasāhib* in Rāga Basanta, p. 1195, which is as follows :

Whither shall I go Sir? I am happy at home.
 My heart will not go with me; it hath become a cripple.
 One day I did have an inclination to go;
 I ground sandal, took distilled aloe wood and many perfumes,
 And was proceeding to worship God in a temple,
 When my spiritual guide showed me God in my heart.
 Wherever I go I find only water or stones.
 But Thou, O God, art equally contained in everything.
 The Veds and the the Purans all I have seen and searched.
 Go thou thither, if God be not here.
 O true guru, I am a sacrifice unto thee
 Who hast cut away all my perplexities and doubts.
 Ramananda's Lord is the all-pervading God;
 The guru's Word cutteth away millions of sin.

(Translation by M.A. Macauliffe).

45. Badrinārāyaṇa Śrivāstava, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

46. Baladeva Upādhyaya, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

As far as the relation of Svāmi Rāmānanda with the Śri Vaiṣṇava movement is concerned, traditional accounts and popular tradition maintain that he is a disciple of an Advaita teacher but later on becomes the disciple of Śri Rāghavānanda a Viśiṣṭādvaitin teacher and spiritual successor of Śri Rāmānuja. Because of his liberal views regarding observance of dietary rules Rāmānanda has a dispute with the disciples of Rāghavānanda; followed by his bold departure from the Śri Vaiṣṇavas and establishment of his own independent sect called Rāmāvata. This is one of the most momentous revolution that has occurred in the religious history of Northern India with far reaching consequences, giving a new orientation to the bhakti movement in the North.

In the absence of any authentic sources Rāmānanda's religious doctrines and beliefs are described differently by different scholars. According to Grierson, Bhandarkar, Badrinārāyaṇa Śrivāstava his philosophical system is the same as that of Rāmānuja.⁴⁷ But according to Pitāmbardatt Barthwāl, his philosophical system is a synthesis of the elements of *Advaita Vedānta*, 'Yoga' and *Premābhakti*.⁴⁸ Acārya Parāśū Rāma Caturvedi is of the view that this system attempts to synthesize the elements of Yoga with *Premābhakti*,⁴⁹ Farquhar and M.A. Macauliffe on the other hand, note the influence of Islam on his teachings.⁵⁰

All these elements are evident in the bhakti movement of his period, but the actual contribution of Svāmi Rāmānanda does not consist in evolving a new synthesis, but in making a break with the old tradition, which had developed serious faults, in betraying a liberal attitude towards some of the new elements which became part of the cultural milieu. In addition to it Rāmānanda is a great reformer of the later medieval centuries.

The reforms of Rāmānanda include considerable freedom,

47. G. Grierson, Ramanandis or Ramawata in the *ERE*, Vol. X, p. 570a.

48. Pitāmbardatt Barthwāl, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

49. Acārya Parāśū Rāma Caturvedi, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

50. Farquhar, *op. cit.*, p. 325; M.A. Macauliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

in the observance of culinary rules maintained by the followers of Rāmānuja; the preaching of the doctrine of bhakti to all the four castes, without any prejudice and admittance of disciples from all castes, from both sexes and even from among the Muslims.

His teachings give rise to two different schools of bhakti, one conservative and the other radical. The conservative school, which has been given the name *saguṇa* bhakti, believes in the doctrine of *avatāra* and it is represented by Tulsīdāsa. Their inclination towards the original Śri Vaiṣṇava faith is quite discernible. The radical school is called *nirguṇa* bhakti, and is represented by Kabīra, Ravidāsa and a band of other *bhaktas*. It is with this latter school that we are chiefly concerned in the following pages, we briefly discuss the main causes of the emergence of this *nirguṇa* school, its basic characteristics and its main points of departure from the Śri Vaiṣṇava form of bhakti.

The Santa Tradition Of Northern India

The *Santa Pramparā*⁵¹ or the *nirguṇa sampradāya*⁵² are names given to the religious movement which is represented by Kabīra, Ravidāsa and other *bhaktas*, and which flourishes in the later medieval centuries in Northern India. Two possible derivations of the term *santa* have been suggested. Either it is derived from the Pāli word *Śanta* which means quietist or it is the plural form of word *sat* which in Hindi is used in the singular sense meaning 'one who believes in the Truth', i.e. the perfected or the realized person.⁵³ The term in the present context is used in the latter sense—the perfect or ideal person, which the seekers of this religious movement aim at becoming.

To avoid misunderstanding, it should be kept in mind that the term *santa* is also used as a technical word for the followers of the *Vīṭhala* or *Vārakari Sampradāya* of Mahārāstra.⁵⁴

51. Parsū Rāma Caturvedī. *Utarī Bhārata Kī Santa Pramparā*.

52. Pitāmbardatt Barthwāl, *Hindi Kāvya Nirguna Sampradāya*. Gobinda Triguṇāyata, *Hindi Ki Nirguna Kāvyaadhārā Aur Uskī dārsśnic Pristhābhūmī*

53. Pitāmbardatt Barthwāl, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

54. R.D.Ranade, *Mysticism in Maharastra*, Poona, 1933, p. 42.

The usage of the term *santa* in the present context should not be confused with the followers of the *Vīṭṭhal Sampradāya* who are also known as *santas*. However *santa* Nāmdeva, who has been included in the *Santa* tradition, provides a direct link between these two *Sampradāyas* (traditions). The *saguna santas*, such as Tulsīdāsa and Sūrdāsa, however, are not included under the category of 'Santa' as it is understood in the *Santa* tradition. In short the term 'Santa' implies a loose fellowship of the believers in a supreme, non-incarnated God.⁵⁵

The *nirguna sampradāya*, the other term for *santa pramparā* is given by some of the scholars to this particular movement. The word *nirguna* expresses the *santa*'s idea of an attributeless God. The term inadequately communicates their idea but since it differentiates their concept from that held by the *saguna santas*, it has become prevalent.⁵⁶

It is commonly believed that the *santa* tradition is a later phase of Vaiṣṇava bhakti. The reason for this misapprehension may be a common emphasis on 'love' as the essential religious response. But, as the fact shows the *Santā* tradition is not merely a later phase, but a new movement that tends to reject or replace some of the essential features of Vaiṣṇava bhakti of the South.

The religious and cultural milieu in which the Santa tradition evolves, is totally distinct from the one in which Vaiṣṇava bhakti emerges. In the later medival centuries, at the time of the rise of the Santa tradition, Islam is asserting its ascendancy over Hinduism as a whole. The whole of the Northern India is under the complete political dominion of the Muslims. The royal patronage enjoyed by the Hindus is lost. The proselytizing activities of the Muslims with the use of force came to be considered as religiously meritorious. The Hindus and other non-Muslims suffer heavy persecution at the hands of their foreign masters. Countless people lose their lives in the struggle because they hold religious convictions other than those found in the framework of Islam. The tem-

55. W.H. Mc Leod, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

56. Piāmbardatt Barthwāl, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

ples of the Hindus and other non-Muslims are raised to the ground and they themselves are put under heavy taxation for their non-Islamic belief.

The lower classes among the Hindus undergo double persecution. First, they are subject to suppression by the so-called higher classes of the Hindu society; second they are persecuted by the Muslims. The prevalent Hindu religion, instead of coming to the rescue, only helps the higher orders to perpetuate their social and religious dominion over the lower classes.

The Muslim suppression and forcible proselytizing of the non-Muslims make these two cultural groups like two banks ever separated by the river flowing between them. The need is felt to build a bridge of understanding to cross this gap, but orthodox Hindus and Muslims are not fit for the task. Fortunately there appear the groups of *bhaktas*, sufis and yogis who come forward to perform the task. These *Sādhakas*, being liberal and more open to the faith of other men by their very nature, attempt a sympathetic understanding of each others' faiths. Not only are they free from the orthodoxy of their respective traditions, but also are critical of the religious exclusivism of those traditions. The critical attitude of these free-thinking *sādhakas* helps in the cultivation of a spirit of reform.

A significant contribution to the growth of a liberal attitude is made by the Siddhas and the Nāthas, who because of their non-acceptance of a Godhead and their non-observance of the Brāhmaṇical social order and orthodox rites are considered heterodox by Brāhmaṇical society. The origin of this sect is not clearly known, but there is no doubt the sect owes to Śaiva teachings and Tāntric Buddhism. The Nātha Yoga technique for the realization of the ultimate aim of life is peculiar to them. The sect is divided into various sub-sects, but all claim allegiance to Gorakhnātha, a semi-legendary figure.

The encounter between these indigenous and foreign religious movement begins at an early stage. Scholars trace

Islamic influence, though indirect and selective, as early as Rāmānuja.⁵⁷ The process of intermixing, encounter and interaction becomes more evident in the later medieval centuries. For example, Svāmi Rāmānanda admits of followers from among Muslims and from the lower castes, and explicitly rejects idol worship⁵⁸, clearly indicate a more advanced stage in the process of cultural fusion.

The presence and encounter of these movements provides the background for the rise of the movement that later on is called the Santa tradition. As this cultural fusion begins at an early stage, we find scattered examples of Yogis, Bhaktas and Sufis whose religious beliefs and practices are very close to the later Santas. In fact they may, well be regarded as the forerunners of the Santa movement. But it is actually with Svāmi Rāmānanda that this process of rapprochement becomes intense. Santa Kabīra, a prominent follower of Svāmi Rāmānanda is at the height of this mutual interaction. It is Kabīra who initiates the practice of eschewing all ritualistic beliefs and practices, his radical attitude later becoming a distinct characteristic of the Santa tradition. Because of his great contribution in the formation of the movement, he is often regarded as its founder.

“The Santa tradition,” as understood by W.H. McLeod, “was essentially a synthesis of the three principal dissenting movements, a compound of elements drawn mainly from Vaisnava bhakti and the *haṭha yoga* of the Nātha Yogis, with a marginal contribution from Sufism.”⁵⁹ Gobind Triguṇāyat, in his studies of the philosophical background of the *Nirguna* school, endeavours to show the influence on the Santa tradition of all the earlier religious philosophical schools found in the Indian religious tradition. In the final analysis his conclusions are similar to McLeod's. Elements of other Indian religious schools which have found place in the Santa tradition

57. Tara Chand, *op. cit.*, p. 10;

Yusuf Hussain, *Medieval Indian Culture* (Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1962), p. 43.

58. *Gurūgranthasāhīh*, Rāmānanda, Basanta, p. 1195.

59. W.H. McLeod, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

were already in the cultural milieu and they reached the Santa tradition through the Vaiṣṇava bhakti, *haṭha yoga* and Sufism.

With the Santas as with the Vaiṣṇavas the necessary religious response is love, causing perhaps the confusion of the Santas with the Vaiṣṇava bhaktas, despite the fundamental differences between these two traditions. Unlike the Vaiṣṇava bhaktas the love of the Santas is directed not towards one of the *avtāras* of Viṣṇu, but to the Supreme Lord Himself. The expression of this love is not through the ceremonial practices, but through strictly inward meditation on the Divine Nāma and through inner devotion to God. The practice of image worship is regarded as irrelevant by the Santas. The institution of the priesthood, and the stratification of society into various grades on the basis of birth comes under severe criticism. Instead of the observance of elaborate ritual practices, emphasis shifts to interior devotion and ethical life. The religious exclusivism of both Hindus and Muslims is rejected. The doctrine of the incarnation of God is also overthrown by the doctrine of the all-prevailing, indwelling Supreme God. Similarly the Santas do not acknowledge any external religious authority. Instead their own inner religious experience is the highest authority for them. However, in spite of all these fundamental differences it is the bhakti element that makes principal contribution to this new synthesis especially at the early stages of its development.

The Santas often use Nātha terminology and concepts such as *sahaja*, *sabada*, *surati*, etc. but give them a theistic content. They owe a great debt to the Nāthas also for their rejection of exterior forms, ceremonies, caste distinctions, sacred languages and scriptures, for the strong emphasis upon unity as opposed to duality, and for the concept of mystical union which destroys this duality.⁶⁰

From Islamic sources also the Santas derive several important elements, through the Sufis. The contribution of Islam to the Santa tradition is more of a negative nature than that of

60 W.H. McLeod, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

a positive one. From Islam the Santas borrow a critical attitude.⁶¹ Their rejection of idol worship, rejection of the doctrine of *avtāra* and of social and religious inequalities are basically due to the influence of Islam. Assimilating elements from all these traditions, the Santa tradition evolves as a distinct religious movement with distinct characteristic features. McLeod gives a brief summary of the characteristics of the Santa movement in the *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion*:

"The Sants were monotheists, but the God whom they addressed and with whom they sought union was in no sense to be understood in anthropomorphic terms. His manifestation was through His immanence in His creation and in particular through His indwelling within the human soul. It was there that He, by grace, revealed Himself and man's proper response was a love expressed through meditation on the divine Name. External authorities and ceremonies were useless for this purpose and religious exercises, pilgrimage and ritual bathing were all accordingly rejected. The inward way to God was open to all who were prepared to accept the difficulties and the discipline which it would involve, and so caste was rejected also. Great importance was attached to *gurū* who might be a human teacher or who might be understood not as a personal but as the inner voice of God. No value was accorded to celibacy or asceticism. Hindu and Muslim sectarian notions were spurned not because the two systems were regarded as basically true but because both were regarded as radically wrong and ultimately futile."⁶²

The above given brief account of the characteristics of the Santa movement clearly shows the fundamental departure from Vaiṣṇava bhakti. Although it borrows several elements from the existing liberal religious movements, it is not simply a synthesis of these elements for the personal religious experience of the Santas is central to the whole of the movement. It is their own experience that leads to the assertion of the above characteristics, and although the Santas differ among themselves regarding their emphasis on one element over another these characteristics seem to provide a common ground on which all of them agree. In its early years the movement was not dominant but it was most fertile and in time it changed the

61. Pitāmbardatta Baṛthwāl, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

62. W.H. McLeod, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

course of the religious history of India. Bhakta Ravidāsa was one of the most prominent Santas, who belongs to the formative period of this movement. In the final chapter, we make a detailed study of the religious beliefs of Bhakta Ravidāsa against the background of the various schools of bhakti described above.

CHAPTER IV

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF BHAKTA RAVIDĀSA

Earlier, while discussing the movement of bhakti in the South, we spoke of the two traditions of the *Acāryas* (theologians) and the *Santas* (mystics). The main object of the *Acāryas* was to provide philosophical justification for one way of God-realization over another: the *Santas* on the other hand, were primarily concerned with leading a pure and chaste life devoted to the service of God. Most of these *Santas* composed lyrical hymns, which were a mode of expressing their pangs of separation from God and a way of communicating their intense feelings of love for Him. In this impassioned poetry, they sang of the glories and grace of God. Ravidāsa, a mystic-poet who composes lyrical verses overflowing with devotional fervour, definitely belongs to the latter.

The hymns of the mystic-poets may be called the poetry of divine love, but the fact remains that it is also a revelation of God. Evelyn Underhill's definition of mystic poetry provides a profound insight into the nature of this poetry :

The poetry of mysticism might be defined on the one hand as a temperamental reaction to the vision of Reality : on the other, as a form of prophecy. As it is the special vocation of the mystical consciousness to mediate between two orders, going out in loving adoration towards God and coming home to tell the secrets of Eternity to other men, so the artistic expression of this consciousness has also a double character. It is a love-poetry but love-poetry which is often written with a missionary intention.¹

From the foregoing, it is clear that the primary concern of the authors of these psalms is not theological. However, one

1. Rabindranath Tagore, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (London, Macmillan and Co., 1962), pp. 19-20. (Introduction).

should not therefore think that there is not consistent system or order of beliefs in their verses. There is a fully developed belief-system underlying the mystical poetry of these saints, which can easily be recognised if a conscious effort is made to analyse their verses. It is on the basis of such analysis that we can form an outline of the belief system of Ravidāsa.

In order to build a comprehensive belief system of Ravidāsa the following theological questions may help clarify the different aspects of his spiritual vision : What is the nature of God with whom Ravidāsa seeks union ? How is God related to the *jīva* (being) and the world ? What are the causes and the nature of human bondage ? How can this bondage be removed ? That is, what is the path to God-realization? What is the nature of release, and how does it effect the human personality ? The answers to these questions form the basic framework of belief-system of bhakta Ravidāsa. Here we discuss these questions in some detail in order to form an understanding of his belief-system.

The Nature Of God

It is from the central theme of 'God' that his belief system evolves. God here is not an abstract metaphysical principle but a living Reality. Ravidāsa does not give any argument to prove the existence of God, because for him God is more real than the world around him, actively participating in our day-to-day life. He shows His grace by helping man to free himself from bondage and attain liberation. The love and devotion of Ravidāsa is directed to Him alone.

The nature of God is problem elusive of any satisfactory rational solution. The essential nature of God always remains indescribable, for the human tools of understanding and the modes of expression are inadequate to measure the vastness and depth of God. God is not to be perceived by the human senses, but to be realized intuitively, like the drop merging in the ocean which cannot know the ocean, but can become one with it. The human senses are not only inadequate to fathom

His depths, but also they constitute hindrances in entering into union with Him :

Our passions are strong, and our discrimination weak;
Our understanding cannot enter into God's designs.
We say one thing and do another, worldly
Love hindereth us from understanding.²

Even if one has realized God he cannot fully describe Him. Images, metaphors and symbols, the literary modes of ordering and expressing internal experience—do not lead us far, because there is no parallel with which God can be likened.

Saith Rav Das, why say more regarding the Ineffable?
Thou, O God, art Thine own
parallel; to what can I liken Thee³
Even supreme jogis cannot explain
Thine attributes, which are beyond expression.⁴

Although essentially inexpressible, yet the saints in their love and desire to share their experience of the Supreme with others have tried to give expression to it. This expression primarily takes the form of description of His attributes, glories and praises. For this purpose they have employed both negative and positive modes of expression, since it is often easier, to describe God negatively than positively. It is on the basis of such references that an idea of His nature can be formed.

The first and most basic aspect of the nature of God which is emphatically and repeatedly maintained in Ravidāsa's verses is His unity. God is the one God. There is no scope for 'duality' 'trinity', or 'triad' in Him :

No second or third in Him :
He ruleth alone.⁵

The *Brāhmaṇical* triad, the belief in the three gods of creation, sustenance and destruction (Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva), has not found acceptance with Ravidāsa. These gods, as we learn from his verses, are not even equal to the saint's immersion in the devotion of the Supreme God :

2. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa. 2/3, p. 658.

3. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Bilāvala, Ravidāsa. 3/1, p. 858.

4. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gaurī Pūrbī, Ravidāsa, 3/1, p. 346.

5. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gaurī, Ravidāsa 2/2, p. 345.

Neither the Lord of Lakshmi nor the Lord
of Kailas nor anyone else is equal to
those who repeat God's Name.⁶

With the rejection of the polytheistic idea of God, the doctrine of *avatāra* (descent or manifestation of God in human form) is also disregarded, though the traditional names associated with various *avtāras* of Viṣṇu are retained, denoting the idea of the One Supreme God. The traditional ritualistic form of bhakti, which was popular with the worshippers of *avatāras*, has also been replaced by *nāma-bhakti* (loving adoration and continuous remembrance of God by contemplating on His attributes). The *ārtī*⁷ that Ravidāsa performs is of *nāma* (the devine name, the expression of the nature and being of God in terms comprehensible to the human understanding). His idea of God may be called monotheistic, but monotheism here is not the same as found in the Semitic religions, where the main emphasis is on the transcendence of God. It is interesting to note in this context that Ravidāsa does not use any Islamic term to designate the idea of God. Ravidāsa has used the following traditional names of God : Rāma, Rājā Rāma, Rāmacanda, Raghūnātha, Harī, Mādhava, Murārī, Mukaṇda, Gobinda, Deva, Anaṇta, Karatā, Niranjana, Satināmu, Prabhū, Nārāyaṇa. Though the names are same as with the *saguṇa* Santas or Vaiṣṇava bhaktas but in the present context they have been given new meanings. For Ravidāsa God is transcendent and immanent both. He is the master of the creation, and is its indwelling principle at the same time :

He is one alone though diffused in many ways;
recall, recall Him to your thoughts;
He filleth creation.⁸

The unity of God in relation to creation has been understood in the sense that creation is neither eternal nor independ-

6. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Malāra, Ravidāsa, 1/2, p. 1293.

7. 'A ceremony performed in adoration of the gods by waving burning lamps round the head of the image, or before it, accompanied with boisterous music and ringing of bells; hymns sung in praise of the gods worshipped on the occasion of performing the ceremony; a platter containing a burning lamp with several wicks.'

8. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Malāra, Ravidāsa, 2/1, p. 1293.

ent. It issues forth from God and God is its only support. It is *bājī* (play) or *līlā* (sport) of the *bājīgara* (player). The creation, therefore, has no existence independent of God. God is the only reality :

 Saith Rav Das, the world is a play, my brethren;
 I have established loving relations with the True Actor.⁹

 Saith Rav Das, O fool and mad man,
 Didst thou not reflect that the world is a transitory abode?¹⁰

God not only creates the world but also is its supreme ruler. The world is governed by His will :

 Saith Rav Das, God is nearer to us than our hands and feet,
 It is what taketh place by his will that taketh place.¹¹

It is through God that the world is preserved and sustained :

 He who gave the life conveyeth thee sustenance
 And in every heart openeth a shop.¹²

God is the final judge and we are accountable to Him for our good and bad deeds. We are rewarded or punished on the merits of our *karmas* (deeds) :

 Saith Rav Das, when my account is taken,
 I shall see whatever I have done recorded to my credit.¹³

and

 Man is proud of his son and wife;
 It is from him God will take an account.
 Thou shalt suffer for what thou thyself has done, O soul.¹⁴

God is not only the passive supervisor of the law of *karma*, but also actively participates in it. The idea of God with Ravidāsa is not deistic. The law of *Karma* is in fact the will of the gracious Lord. It may be noted that in the verses of Ravidāsa we do not find so much emphasis on divine justice as we find on His grace. God is *dayāla* (gracious, compassionate), *garība nivāja* (cherisher of the poor), *bhavakhandana* (destroyer of the cycle of transmigration),

9. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa 3/6, p. 487.

10. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sūhī, Ravidāsa 3/2, p. 793.

11. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa 4/1, 618.

12. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sūhī, Ravidāsa 2/2, p. 794.

13. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Malāra, Ravidāsa 3/3, p. 1293.

14. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Basanta, Ravidāsa 4/1, p. 1196.

mukti kā dātā (deliverer of salvation). It is by the grace of the Lord, the lowest of the low and the most humble are raised to the highest realms of spirituality :

Everybody used to laugh on seeing my poverty—such was my condition;

But I hold the whole eighteen supernatural powers in the palm of my hand through Thy favour.¹⁵

and

Who but Thee my jewel, could do such a thing?

Cherisher of the poor, Lord of the earth;

Thou hast put over my head the umbrella of *spiritual sovereignty*.

Thou relonest towards him whose touch defileth the world;

The lowly dost thou exalt, my God non dost Thou fear.

One characteristic emphasis of Bhakta Ravidāsa in his description of the nature of God is that God has been described as the cherisher of the poor, protector and uplifter of the down-trodden, who shows His grace without the consideration of high or low. This emphasis of Ravidāsa reflects his concern for the downtrodden and the outcaste. He is pioneering their just cause against the inequalities among men created by the dominating priestly class. All are equal in the eyes of God and all have an equal right to love and worship Him.

God's knowledge is revealed to the *gurū* (enlightener) and through the guidance and grace of the *gurū* we can know God :

Let me dedicate and offer my body and soul as my worship,

Thus, by the guru's favour, shall

I find the Pure One.¹⁷

The Relationship of God with the Jīva and the World

The problem of the relationship of the Supreme Spirit with the *jīva* (human being), and the world occupies a central place in all the theistic religious schools of India. In fact, it is on the basis of different approaches to this relationship that different religious schools are evolved. This specific problem

15. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Bilāvala, Ravidāsa 1/1, p. 858.

16. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Mārū, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 1.06.

17. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gūjrī, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 525.

is elaborately treated in almost all the theistic systems of Indian thought.

It has already been shown that ultimate concern of Bhakta Ravidāsa was the realization of God and not the rational enquiry into the problems of religion. We, therefore, do not find any fully developed cosmogony in his verses. Only those aspects of the problem are mentioned that have direct bearing on his central concern with God-realization.

The Jīva

The body is a wall of water supported by a pillar of air;
blood and semen are its mortar.

The poor soul dwelleth in a skeleton of bones,
flesh, and veins;

O mortal, what is mine and what is thine?
As a bird percheth on a tree,
so doth the soul on the body....¹⁸

In the above hymn we find Ravidāsa's view of *jīva* in brief. The *jīva* for him is neither *ātman* (soul) nor body; it is a combination of both. The *jīva* is *ātman*, imprisoned in the body and entangled with the world. The *ātman* is eternal and identical with God.

Between Thee and me,
between me and Thee
what difference can there be?

The same as between gold and the
bracelet, between water and its ripples.¹⁹

...
The human body on the other hand is
impermanent and perishable :
Why art thou proud, O demented body?
Thou art much more short-lived than a
toadstool in the month of Bhadon.²⁰

Divine aspirations and worldly instincts both inhabit the *jīva*. In him there are both the possibilities of his attaching himself to God, or to the world. It is through the inner sense of *mana* (term is used for mind, heart and soul variably), that the *jīva* is driven to one end or the other. It is perhaps because

18. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 1/6, p.659.

19. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Siri, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 93.

20. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Basanta; Ravidāsa. 1/1, p. 1196.

of this crucial role of *mana* in the *jīva*, that all sermons are addressed to it, and all complaints are also made against it :

O Lord, I know nothing; I have sold my soul (*mana*) to mammon.

Thou art styled the great Lord of the world, and we the sensualists of the *kal* age.

The five evil passions which have corrupted my heart,

Have at every moment thrown barrier between Thee and me.

Whithersoever I look, there is a stock of trouble.²¹

The *jīva* essentially is identical with God, but his attachment with the world alienates him from God. The worldly attachments of the *jīva* constitute the root cause of all of his sufferings. The *jīva* is dependent on God for its existence. God is the giver of life to the *jīva* and the breath of his breath.

O God, Lord of the earth, Giver of life to men,

Forget me not I am Thy slave;²²

He is not only the giver of life, but also supports and sustains it

He who gave thee life conveyeth thee sustenance,

And in every heart openeth a shop.²³

As soon as the *jīva* comes to realize the falsity of his attachment with the world, and is awakened to God's reality he realizes God. He is no longer estranged from God. This state of *jīva* is called *jīvanmukti* (liberation in life). He is delivered in the body and at the time of his death, he merges with God as light merges in light or water merges in water.

The World

God is the creator of the world. As a tree from the seed, creation issues from Him.

The Onkara (God) is like the seed

Which pervades all the three world.²⁴

The world has no independent existence of its own. It derives its existence from God. God is its underlying

21. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, *Jaitasarī*, Ravidāsa, 3/1, p. 710.

22. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, *Gauri Guarer*, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 345.

23. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, *Sūhī*, Ravidāsa, 2/2 p. 794.

24. *Raidāsaji Kī Bānū*, p. 3.

principle. He is the source and support of the world.

In all things the one Lord assumeth various shapes;

God supporteth in all hearts.²⁵

He is one alone though diffused in many ways;

recall, recall Him to your thoughts;

He filleth creation.²⁶

Compared to the eternity of God, the world is transitory and impermanent. It is like a *bājī* (play) or sport of God, who has been called the *bājīgara* (the player) :

This world is like the *fleeting colour*

of safflower.

But the colour of my God is the

permanent dye of madder.

Saith the tanner Rav Das.²⁷

...

Saith Rav Das, the world is play, my

brethren;

I have established loving relations

with the True Actor.²⁸

Since the world does not have any reality of its own, those who cherish it, and attach themselves to it are under an illusion, and are estranged from reality. They take the world for 'something' which it is not. It is in this sense that the world is unreal and constitutes entanglements :

High and low have been delivered

from entanglements of the world through Thee.²⁹

Though the world is impermanent and unreal it has an important part to play in the liberation of the *jīva*. It is like the battlefield where the *jīva* has to fight the battle of his release from bondage. He is to attach himself to God while living in this world of entanglements. His path of liberation passes through this transitory and unreal world. It may be seen from the above that unlike the *Advaita*, the relative reality of the world is recognised. The world is real but it is not eternal. Its reality is derived from God who dwells in it.

25. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, sorathi, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 6r58.

26. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Malāra, Ravidāsa, 2/2, p. 1293.

27. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gauṛī, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 346.

28. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 3/6, p. 478.

29. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Bilāvala, Ravidāsa, 2/1, p. 858.

The Nature and Causes of Human Bondage

As we have noticed earlier the *jīva* essentially is identical with the Supreme Spirit, but as it exists in the human body, it is in bondage :

Remove my troubles, make Thy servant
full of love for Thee.³⁰

.....
Whithersoever I look, there is a
stock of trouble.³¹

All the ills and sufferings of *jīva* are due to his bondage. The bondage, consists in *jīva*'s attachment to the world. The world is impermanent, therefore unreal. Any attachment to this false and unreal world leads to the *āvāgavāna* (transmigration), which is called the continuing cycle of the sufferings of *jīva*;

They have now obtained human birth so
difficult to obtain, and yet in it
they associate with the base.

Men and lower animals, wherever they are,
born subject to their previous acts,

And the noose of Death which hangeth
over them can by no means be warded off.³²

Negatively speaking, bondage may be described as separation from God. Separated from God, the *jīva* wanders in the cycle of transmigration :

For many births have I been separated
from Thee, o God!

This birth is on Thine own account.³³

The question is why does the *jīva* associate with the world and what does it mean to be separated from God?

The main cause of the *jīva*'s separation from God we find expressed in the verses of Ravidāsa is *aviveka* or *avidyā*. The literal translation of *aviveka* or *avidyā* may be 'ignorance', but in the present context it implies metaphysical ignorance. *Viveka* is a human faculty of discrimination. It distinguishes between good and evil for the *jīva* and imparts him the right

30. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gauṇī, Ravidāsa, 2/1, p. 345.

31. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Jaitsarī, Ravidāsa, 3/1, p. 716.

32. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 3/1, p. 486.

33. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Dhunnāsarī, Ravidāsa, 2/1, p. 694.

knowledge regarding the nature of things. It is through the help and guidance of *viveka* that the *jīva* is led on the path of God-realization. Ignorance may be defined as the loss or absence of *viveka* :

O God, man loveth ignorance;
 His lamp of discrimination hath grown dim.³⁴
 Our passions are strong, and our discrimination
 weak;
 Our understanding cannot enter into God's designs.
 We say one thing, and do another;
 Worldly love hindereth us from understanding.³⁵

.....

My mind (*mana*) not clear,
 O God; and so I cannot
 understand Thy condition.³⁶

Ignorance corrupts the human *mana*. The ignorant *jīva* fails to recognise the real nature of the world and his relationship to it. *Bhrama* (doubt) therefore dwells in the ignorant or illusione *mana*, keeping the human *mana* in *dubidha* (duality). The very nature of *bhrama* is defined as, that which conceals the true nature of things, and projects what is not there :

O God, what shall I say?
 Through illusion things are not
 as they are supposed to be.³⁷

To the one in illusion the real nature of the world is concealed. Believing the world to be real, he associates with it. The evil passions overpower the ignorant mind, and force it to the path of ruin and sufferings :

O God, the knot of doubt unravel not;
 Lust, wrath, worldly love, pride, and jealousy—
 these five combined plunder the world;³⁸

.....

As the pit full of frogs which know
 nothing of different countries,
 So my mind infatuated with evil

34. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 486.

35. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 2/3, p. 658.

36. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gauṇī, Ravidāsa, 2/1, p. 346.

37. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 657.

38. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Rāmakalī, Ravidāsa, 1/1, pp. 973-74.

Passions taketh no thought of this world
or the next.

O Lord of all the world,

Grant me a sight of Thee for a moment;

My mind is not clear, O God, and so

I cannot understand Thy condition.

Take pity on me that my doubts may be

dispelled, and teach me right understanding.³⁹

The passions are inborn in the *jīva*. They are the attractions of the short-lived pleasures of the world. If unchecked play of these passions is allowed, the result can be disastrous for man. Man, entangled with the world, and absorbed in its pleasures, can have no hope of release from the noose of death and sufferings :

In thought, word, and deed he is fascinated
by pleasures,

So when he perisheth he is

contained somewhere else.⁴⁰

Ignorance or illusion further gives rise to ego in man. The ego is a sense of separate personality or the sense of 'I-amness'. In ego the *jīva* regards himself as the doer or the sole agent. The ego creates an unbridgeable gap between *jīva* and God :

When there was egoism in me, Thou were not with me;

Now that Thou art with me, there is no egoism.⁴¹

Unless doubts are dispelled from the *mana*, the *jīva* cannot be purged of pride or ego. Right understanding cannot be restored to egoistic man :

Doubt shall thus ever dwell in the heart;
who shall dispel pride?⁴²

We are great poets, of high family, we are Pandits,
We are Jogis, Sanyasis, Gyanis, virtuous
heroes, we are generous, these ideas
shall never perish.

Saith Rav Das, all these men do not

39. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gauṛī, Ravidāsa, 1-2/1, p. 346.

40. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āśā, Ravidāsa, 2/6, p. 487.

41. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 657.

42. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gauṛī, Ravidāsa, 3/1, p. 346.

understand God,
they go astray like mad men.⁴³

Ignorance, thus, is the main cause of the *jīva*'s separation from God. It is because of his ignorance that the *jīva* comes to regard the false and fleeting world as real and eternal. Absorbed in the short-lived pleasures of the world, he takes no thought of eternal bliss which is in union with God. Human birth, so rare an opportunity goes unrewarded :

I obtained this birth difficult of
attainment as the reward of merit.
But it passeth away in vain *on account*
of my want of discrimination
Say of what account would be a place
and a throne like King Inder's
be without devotion to God?⁴⁴

I have not thought of the pleasure in the
Supreme God's Name.

a pleasure in which all other pleasures are forgotten.
What we ought to have known we know not;

we have become mad, and not consider what
we ought to have considered, and so our days have passed
away.

Our passions are strong, and our discrimination weak;
Our understanding cannot enter into God's designs.

We say one thing, and do another;
Worldly love hindereth us from understanding.⁴⁵

The abode of God is a place free from 'sorrow and suffering'. It is a place "where ceaseless happiness doth reign". But the *jīva*, separated from God, wanders in the cycle of transmigration. Estranged from God the *jīva* absorbs himself in the temporary pleasures of the world. When these temporary pleasures vanish, the *jīva* again suffers at their loss. The real hell is the life of separation from God. Such a life Ravidāsa calls the life of pain :

Namdev as if duty bound gave milk to God to drink;
Wherefore he had not the pain of being born again in the world⁴⁶

43. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Rāmakalī, Ravidāsa, 2-1/1, p. 974.

44. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 1/3, p. 658.

45. *Gurūgarthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 2-3/3, p. 658.

46. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa 2/5, p. 487.

The ignorant engrossed in the love of worldly pleasures and caught in the cycle of pain and suffering, is left helpless and he repeats one question to himself :

How shall I be saved?
No one explaineth to me
How my transmigration may cease.⁴⁷

The Path of Liberation

The doubts, the entanglements, and the sins of him who maketh the way of devotion firm in his heart shall be cut away:

He shall restrain his mind, obtain happiness,
and meditate on Him alone who possesseth
all qualities and yet possesseth none.⁴⁸

Very fortunate are they who tranquilly
contemplate and fix their attention
upon God; they shall afterwards be freed from their troubles.
Saith Rav Das, the fear of death and birth fleeteth from him who
hath put the light of *divine knowledge* into his heart.⁴⁹

It is explicitly maintained in the above hymns that the path of liberation is the path of loving devotion to God. Ravidāsa belongs to the bhakti movement, but his bhakti is not to be understood in the traditional sense of the Tāmil school of devotion, and some other schools of the later period, evolved around the worship of various *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. Bhakti for Ravidāsa has its own peculiar features and characteristic emphases. In the following hymn, which describes the nature of devotion, Ravidāsa has shown the difference between his own path and some of the other paths, popular during his own times :

O brother, bhakti is not practiseth this way;
Whatever we do without the *nāma* of God is illusion.
Bhakti does not consist in giving charity, displaying
learning and retiring to the caves in the forests.
Bhakti does not consist of fun and games, cherishing false hopes and
all that brings disgrace to the honour of the family.

47. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gaurī Ravidāsa, 1/5, p. 346.

48. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gaurī Ravidāsa, 1/7, p. 346.

49. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 3/4, p. 658.

Bhakti does not consist in control of senses, practice of yoga and fasting.

All these are *karmas* that bind us.

Bhakti does not consist in training the sense,

becoming indifferent to the world and increasing knowledge.

Bhakti does not consist in shaving the head,

telling of beads and washing of feet.

All those who do these practices are called virtuous.

As long as we assert ourself,

We cannot attain bhakti;

All that we do in ego increases our *karmas*.

O brother, bhakti is attained when we are purged

of our ego : this is bhakti. We meet God when our
sense of ego is subdued and all the yogic powers
(*ridhis* and *sidhis*) are discarded.

Says Ravidāsa, when all desires are extinguished,

then alone is God near him;

When the soul gets peace,

All wealth is attained.⁵⁰

Negatively speaking, bhakti does not consist in giving charity, renouncing the world, suppressing the senses through the yogic exercises, increasing knowledge, practising the laws of outward purity, and performances of ritualistic worship, Ravidāsa is careful to differentiate his own path from the path

50. एमी भगति न हैि रे भाई ॥

राम नाम धिन जे बिछु वरिअे से सत भरम कहाई ॥ १ ॥

भगति न रम दान भगति न बचे गिआन ॥

भगति न धन में गुदा खुदाई ॥ १ ॥

भगति न एमी हामी भगति न आसपासी ॥

भगति न यह सत बुल कान गीदाई ॥ २ ॥

भगति न दिदी धापा भगति न जैरा सापा ॥

भगति न आहार घटाई दे सत बरम कहाई ॥ ३ ॥

भगति न दिदी सपे भगति न धैरगा धपे ॥

भगति न दे सत बेद बद्धाई ॥ ४ ॥

भगति न भूड़ भूड़ाए भगति न भाला दिखाए ॥

भगति न चरन पुद्धाए दे सत गुली जन कहाई ॥ ५ ॥

भगति न ते ले जाना अप के अप बधाना ॥

सेई जेई करै से से बरम बद्धाई ॥ ६ ॥

अपे गरिए उब भगति पाई एमी भगति भाई ॥

राम मिलिए अपे गुन देइए तिपि मिपि सपै गद्धाई ॥ ७ ॥

बह रैदास हृती आम सध उब हरि ताहीरे पास ॥

आउमा धिर भद्दी उब मधरी निय पाई ॥ ८ ॥

of ritualistic devotion that centres around the images of the *avtaras* of Viṣṇu. True devotion consists in offering one's body and soul at the altar of God and performing the *ārtī* of His *nāma*.

Let me dedicate and offer my body
and soul as my worship.

Thus, by the guru' favour, shall
I find the Pure One.⁵¹

Saith Rav Das, Thy name is the
Arti; the true Name is the food I
offer unto Thee, O God.⁵²

The path of bhakti spoken of by Ravidāsa is the interior path. It may be defined as single-minded, whole-hearted, and desire-free attachment of the *jīva* to God.

It has been mentioned earlier that the *avidyā* or *aviveka* and its consequents constitute the bondage of *jīva*. *Aviveka* or metaphysical-ignorance can be removed only by acquiring true knowledge. Such knowledge cannot be arrived at by intellect only. It has been called direct knowledge or the knowledge of subject-object unity, and such knowledge is equalled with God-realization in the hymns of Ravidāsa. In order to distinguish it from the intellectual knowledge, we can call it 'redeeming knowledge' or 'metaphysical knowledge'. 'Redeeming knowledge' dawns with the attainment of bhakti :

Divine knowledge hath sprung up,
and I have become enlightened;
God hath graciously accepted this
worm as His slave.⁵³

The interior devotion can be attained by following the path that is also interior. The principal constituents of this way of God-realization are surrender to God, remembrance of his *nāma* following the instructions of the *gurū*, company of holy men, cultivation of moral virtues, and the grace of God. Which one of these constituents is primary or secondary is a

51. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gujrī, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 525.

52. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Dhanāsari, Ravidāsa, 4/3, p. 694.

53. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gaunda, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 875.

difficult question to answer. All are equally important, they are inter-linked with one another and are to be practised at the same time.

Self Surrender

According to Ravidāsa, seeking refuge with God is a precondition of the path of loving devotion. It is not possible to worship God without seeking His protection (*śarana*). The act of self-surrender implies one's choice. He who surrenders before God puts faith in Him. Self-surrender is thus an act of faith. It also reflects the humility of the seeker, as the seeker surrenders his self-will to the Will of God. It helps the seeker to purge his soul of ego. Self-surrender, therefore, is the foundation stone of the path of bhakti. Ravidāsa repeatedly emphasizes the need for seeking refuge with God :

Saith Rav Das, I have come to Thy protection;
effect my salvation as Thou thinkest best.⁵⁴

Saith Rav Das, whither shall I go?
What shall I do? Except God's protection
Whose shall I seek?⁵⁵

Thou knowest I am nothing, O God;
Destroyer of fear;
All men have sought Thy protection,
O God, Fulfiller of desires,
They who have sought Thy protection
no longer bear the load of sin⁵⁶

In Buddhism there is the doctrine of triple refuge. The Buddhists go to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha for refuge. Similarly with Ravidāsa also we find emphasis on the need of the three refuges of God, the *nāma* and the company of holy men. For the release of the *jīva* the refuges of *nāma*, and the company of holy men are as important as the first one i.e. refuge of God.

My trade is dressing and cutting leather and
daily removing dead cattle round about Banaras.

54. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sūhī, Ravidāsa, 3/1, p. 793.

55. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Jaitsarī, Ravidāsa 6/1, p. 710.

56. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Bilāvala, Ravidāsa 1/1, p. 858.

Yet prominent Brahmins now prostrate themselves
before me,
since I, the slave Rav Das; have sought
the shelter of Thy name, O God.⁵⁷

If thou seek the protection of holy men,
Thy sins, even though millions upon
millions, shall all be erased.⁵⁸

The doctrine of self-surrender is inseparably linked with the doctrine of the grace of God. He who seeks refuge with God, realizes that his own efforts are futile, and he can be saved only by putting complete faith in the grace of the Lord. It is obvious that this doctrine constitutes one of the important aspects of the path of devotion.

Nāmasimrana

The practice of the remembrance of *nāma* occupies a central place in the path of liberation of Ravidāsa. So much importance is attached to it, that his way of liberation is called the way of *nāma*. 'Nām, for all practical purposes, is identical with the Supreme Reality. The content of *nām* is nothing but God. 'Nām is the total expression of all that God is.'⁵⁹ God's revelation for the seeker is contained in *nāma*. The *Nāma* in the verses of Ravidāsa has been called the divine wealth, the divine knowledge of the *gurū*, the divine love within the easy access of man, the taste of God and the Supreme essence of the nature of God:

The wealth I have loaded is God's name;
the world hath loaded poison.⁶⁰

Rav Das, renounce worldly love;
dispel doubt, and make the guru's
divine knowledge thy religious fervour.⁶¹

57. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Malāra, Ravidāsa, 3/2, p. 1293.

58. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Basanta, Ravidāsa 4/1, p. 1196.

59. W.H. McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion*, (Delhi. Oxford University Press), p. 196.

60. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gaurī, Ravidāsa, 2/1, p. 346.

61. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 486.

The slave Rav Das is dyed with God's love,
And so, through the favour of the guru,
he shall not go to hell.⁶²

I have not thought of the pleasure in the
Supreme God's *name*.
a pleasure in which all other pleasures are
forgotten.⁶³

As *nāma* is divine knowledge, revealed to the heart united with God, it is, therefore, superior to the scriptures which are composed of letters only. The scriptures are the medium, through which *nāma* is described. *Nāma* therefore is not identical with the scripture, it is the essence of the scriptures :

Why repeat not, 'God, God, God,' with thy tongue,
And abandon all other device of words?

The epic poems, the Puranas, the Veds of
Brahma, are all composed out of thirty four
letters.

Bias having reflected expressed his conviction
that there was nothing equal to the name of God.

Very fortunate are they who tranquilly
Contemplate and fix their attention upon God;
they shall afterwards be freed from their
troubles.⁶⁴

The remembrance of *nāma* is the way whereby *nāma* is engrrafted in the heart. When *nāma* comes to dwell in the heart, it washes away all impurities and illuminates it. The process of engraving *nāma* in the heart is carried out by uninterrupted drinking at the fountain of the divine *nāma* :

Thy lotus feet are the home of my heart!
By drinking the nectar of His *name*,
I have found God Who is my wealth.⁶⁵

The first step on the path of the remembrance of *nāma* is the repetition of the 'Word' with the tongue :

Why not repeat, 'God, God, God,' with thy
tongue,
And abandon all other device of words?⁶⁶

62. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 3/5, p. 487.

63. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 1/3, p. 658.

64. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 1-3/4, p. 658.

65. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 1/4, p. 487.

66. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 1/4, p. 658.

God; God; God; God; God; God;
By remembering God, saints and sinners are saved.⁶⁷

Although the remembrance of *nāma* begins with the repetition of the divine word, mere mechanical repetition is not enough. The repetition of *nāma* cannot be effective unless the entire personality of the *sādhaka* (seeker) is actively engaged in it :

I remember Thee, O God, In my heart;
I behold Thee with mine eyes; I fill mine
ears with Thy hymns and praises;
I make my mind the honey-bee,
I put Thy lotus feet into my heart, and
with my tongue I utter Thine ambrosial name.⁶⁸

Likewise, the study of the scriptures also is not the remembrance of *nāma*. Studying can be useful only if the heart comes in direct contact with the essence of the words :

Men read, study, and hear all god's names,
yet God's designs are not known.

How shall iron become pure gold
unless it be touched by the philosopher's stone?⁶⁹

The practices of ritualistic actions and of making offerings, which were prevalent with the devotees of the *avatāras*, have no relevance with the way of *nāma simrana*. It has been already mentioned, that the path of liberation with Bhakta Ravidāsa is interior. The offerings that one is required to make on this way are of *nāma* (*nāma simrana*) and complete surrender to God:

Saith Rav Das, Thy name is the Arti;
the true name is the food I offer
unto Thee. O God.⁷⁰

Let me dedicate and offer my body and soul
(*mana*) as my worship,
Thus, by guru's favour, shall I find the
Pure One.⁷¹

67. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 1/6, p. 487.

68. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Dhanāsari, Ravidāsa, 1/2, p. 695.

69. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Rāmakali, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 973.

70. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Dhanāsari, Ravidāsa, 4/3, p. 694.

71. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Güjri, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 625.

Though one perform the six good acts and belong to high family, yet if he heartily worship not God,

And love not the mention of His lotus feet, he is equal to pariah.⁷²

The sense of ego (self-centredness) constitutes the main hindrance in the way of the remembrance of God. It has been called the dirt of the human heart. Unless the heart is purged of ego, the remembrance of *nāma* cannot be paractised :

Worship God, lay aside egoism :

In thy heart remember God's name betimes.⁷³

Another hindrance in the way of *nāma simrana* is attachment to the world. One cannot become attached to God without developing an attitude of detachment towards the world. The term detachment here should not mislead. Detachment is to be developed and practised while living in the world :

Saith Rav Das , having embraced supreme contempt for the *world*, why not heartily repeat Gods' name, luckless man.⁷⁴

I have joined true love with Thee;
Joining Thee I have broken with all others.⁷⁵

The highest state in the remembrance of *nāma* is attained when God is remembered with a heart full of love for Him. At this stage the mind is constantly attuned to God, like the unobstructed flow of water or the unflickering light of the lamp. It is a state of constant loving absorption in God. This is the highest aim of the way of *nāma simrana*.

Very fortunate are they who tranquilly contemplate and fix their attention upon God; they shall afterwards be freed from their troubles.⁷⁶

If anyone employ himself in repeating God's
name

72. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Kedārā, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 1124.

73. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sūhī, Ravidāsa, 2/2, p. 794.

74. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Bhairon, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 1167.

75. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 3/5, p. 659.

76. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 3/4, p. 658.

And God the philosopher's stone, touch him,
his duality shall no longer remain.⁷⁷

The way of *nāma simrana* is thus the way of freeing one's mind from the world and uniting it with God. Once the mind is freed from the bondage of the world, it gets liberation.

Gurū

The *gurū* (preceptor; enlightener) is the only saviour and guide on the path of bhakti. It is in recognition of his vital role in the way of God-realization that he is worshipped alongwith God. Most of the religions of the world derive their names from the names of their teachers.

The *gurū* is the custodian of divine knowledge. Without the help of the *gurū* the seeker cannot move even a single step on the path of God. For the seeker, the revelation of God is contained in the word of *gurū*. The *gurū*, like the sun, dispels the ignorance of the seeker. The *gurū* is the supreme philosopher's *touchstone* that transforms the life of the seeker. Following the instructions of the *gurū* the seeker comes to realize God in the heart ;

As by the sun's light night departeth,
as all the world knoweth;
As copper when touched by the philosopher's
stone at once becometh gold;
So is the supreme philosopher's stone, the
guru, be found by destiny.
The perturbed mind shall meet God
who is in the heart,
and the doors of adamant shall be opened.⁷⁸

It is through the favour of the *gurū* that the seeker attaches himself to God and saves himself from hell. Realization of God is not possible without the favour and guidance of the *gurū* :

The slave Rav Das is dyed with God's love,
And so, through the favour of the guru,
he shall not go to hell.⁷⁹

77. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Bairon, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 1167.

78. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gauṛī, Ravidāsa, 5-6/1, p. 346.

79. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 3/5, p. 487.

Let me dedicate and offer my body and soul
as my worship,
Thus, by the guru's favour shall I find
the Pure One.⁸⁰

For the seeker *gurū*'s word is *nāma*. The seeker should put his faith in the word of the *gurū* and contemplate upon it :

Rav Das, renounce worldly love,
dispel doubt, and make the guru's
divine knowledge thy religious fervour.⁸¹

It is through the grace of the *gurū* that the seeker associates himself with the company of holy men and realizes their greatness:

The company of the saints, who are Thine image, is my life.
Through the divine knowledge of the guru,
I recognize the saints as gods of gods.⁸²

The company of Holy Men

The company of the saints plays the most vital role on the path of love and devotion. It is like a school where the novice is taught to love God. The saints are completely absorbed in God and free themselves from the sense of self. Like images, the holy men represent God on the earth. There is no attainment higher than that of saint's. The presence of the saints is most holy and inspiring. They save not only themselves but also all those who come to associate with them. For the ordinary people, the lives of the saints serve as an example, for they live in the world untainted by it :

The company of the saints, who are
Thine image, is my life.
Through the divine knowledge of the
guru, I recognize the saints as gods of gods.

...
Between the saints and the Infinite there is no difference;
Rav Das saith, he who knoweth this is wise.⁸³

...
The family in which a saint of God is born,
Whether it be of high or low caste,

80. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gūjrī, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 525.

81. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 486.

82. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 1/2, p. 486.

83. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 2, p. 486.

poor or rich, shall have its unalloyed fame blazoned through the world.

Whether man be a Brahman, a Vaisya,
a Sudar, a Khatri, a Dum, a Chandal or a Malechh.
He becometh pure by worshipping God;
he saveth himself and the families of both his parents.
Blest the village, blest the place of *his birth*,
blest his pure family in all worlds!
He hath quaffed the supreme essence;
abandoning all others, he hath become
intoxicated with it, and renounced sin.

Among pandits, heroes, and emperors, there
is none equal to the saint.

As the leaves of the water-lily in the water,
Saith Rav Das, is the Saint's existence in the
world; he *remaineth uncontaminated* by it.⁸⁴

The heart flowing with love for God is the pre-condition of the path of loving devotion. Such a spark of divine love is produced only in the company of the saints :

Without the companionship of the saints
no love is produced,
and without love no service is
performed for Thee.⁸⁵

By associating with the company of the saints the heart is purged of the self, and with this, all the sins of the seeker are also washed away :

If thou seek the protection of holy man,
Thy sins, even though million upon
millions, shall be erased.⁸⁶

Emphasizing the importance of the company of holy men, Ravidāsa maintains that the highest spiritual goal in life can only be attained by associating with the company of holy men :

By what devotion shall I meet my Beloved,
the Lord of the souls?
The Supreme state is obtained by
association with saints.⁸⁷

84. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Bilāvala, Ravidāsa, 2, p. 858.

85. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Dhanāsari, Ravidāsa, 2/2, p. 694.

86. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Basanta, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 1194.

87. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Malāra, Ravidāsa, 1/3, p. 1293.

Having enumerated all these benefits of the company of holy men, Ravidāsa prays God for the favour of the company of the saints :

Grant me the company of the saints,
a taste for the saint's converse,
the saints' love, O God of gods,
The saints' good works, and the saints'
way, that I may become attached to
what they are attached.⁸⁸

The Puṇya-Karma

The way of the saints is the way of moral and spiritual perfection. The highest goal for Ravidāsa is the attainment of bhakti, but it is to be attained while living in the world and leading an active life. For the attainment of such bhakti Ravidāsa emphasizes the need of *Punya-karmas* (meritorious or moral actions). Our present life is the result of the deeds of previous lives and the karmas in the present life determine our future life.

I obtained the birth difficult of attainment
as the reward of merit,
But it passeth away in vain on account of my
want of discrimination.⁸⁹

In thought, word, and deeds he is fascinated by pleasures,
So when he perisheth he is contained somewhere else.⁹⁰

Punya-karmas and bhakti are interdependent. These *karmas* cannot be performed without devotion of God, but they are conducive to the perfection of bhakti. For Ravidāsa bhakti is the moral standard. Only those actions are meritorious which help man to attain the devotion to God :

Though one perform the six good acts and
belong to a *high* family, yet if he
heartily worship not God,
And love not the mention of His lotus
feet, he is equal to a pariah.⁹¹

88. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 2/2, p. 486.

89. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 1/3, p. 658.

90. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 2/6, p. 487.

91. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Kedārā, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 1124.

Through the name of God, Kabir became renowned, and the accounts of his sins of many births were torn up.⁹²

Actions which are performed to acquire worldly wealth and to fulfil sensuous desires are not meritorious, for they further bind the *jīva* to the cycle of transmigration :

The thoughtless are born again as creeping things
which distinguish not between good and evil;
They have now obtained human birth so
difficult to obtain, *and yet* in it they
associate with the base.⁹³

.....
Prosperity, adversity, worldly love, and
wealth screen God from man;
In them Thy servant is not absorbed.⁹⁴

.....
O God, the knots of doubt unravel not;
Lust, wrath, worldly love, pride, and
jealousy—these five combined plunder the *world*.⁹⁵

For the attainment of bhakti, one is therefore, required to acquire moral virtues, such as wisdom, contentment, humility, service, desirelessness and equivalence in his thoughts and actions. These virtues constitute the inner purity of *jīva*. Without purity of heart, all outward actions are futile and lead one away from God.

Man washeth his body with water,
but in his heart there is evil of every description.

How shall purity result?
My purity is such as the elephant practiseth.⁹⁶

The inculcation of moral virtues therefore is indispensable for the attainment of bhakti.

Grace

Grace is the favour of God. It is an initiation from God to redeem man. The relation of love is not possible without the active involvement of both sides. On the path of loving devotion the involvement of God is through His grace. The practice of self-surrender also implies faith in the grace of God.

92. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 1/5, p. 487.

93. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 2/1, p. 486.

94. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Āsā, Ravidāsa, 2/4, p. 487.

95. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Rāmakalī, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 973-74.

96. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gaurī, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 346.

On the path of loving devotion the grace of God is necessary at every step. If one chooses the path of loving devotion it is because of His grace. If one makes progress on the path of loving devotion it is because of the grace of God. The final release from bondage is also possible through the grace of God :

My Mind is not clear, O God, and so
I cannot understand Thy condition.
Take pity on me that my doubts may be
dispelled, and teach me right understanding.⁹⁷

Everybody used to laugh on seeing my
poverty such was my condition;
But I hold the whole eighteen supernatural
powers in the palm of my hand through
Thy favour.⁹⁸

The path of loving devotion is thus based on faith in the grace of God.

Liberation

Liberation, in brief, is freedom from bondage. It is the goal of all spiritual strivings, a stage where the seeker attains divine knowledge and unites with God.

Divine knowledge hath sprung up,
and I have become enlightened;
God hath graciously accepted this worm as His slave.⁹⁹

The state of liberation is the state of perfection of loving devotion. The *jīva* in this state is completely dyed in the love of God :

When Thou didst bind us with a noose of
illusion,
We bound Thee with a bond of love;
Try to release Thyself; we have been
released by adoring Thee.¹⁰⁰

It has been noticed earlier that the *jīva* essentially is not distinct from God. It is the ego that separates him from God. The state of liberation is the realization of this basic unity

97. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gauṛī, Ravidāsa, 2/1, p. 346.

98. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Bilāvala, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 858.

99. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gaunda, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 875.

100. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 1/2, p. 658.

between the *jīva* and God. In liberation the *jīva* completely merges with God as water with water :

When there was egoism in me,

Thou wert not with me;

Now that Thou art with me;

there is no egoism.

Huge waves are raised by the wind

in the ocean but they are only

water in water.¹⁰¹

At this stage the veil of illusion of the *jīva* is cast away, and with this all doubts, entanglements and sins are also removed. The attractions of the world no longer overpower the liberated one. His thirst for worldly pleasures is satisfied, once for all :

Though the screen of illusion be spread over

the whole world,

Yet it troubleth not the saint.¹⁰²

The doubts the entanglements, and the sins of him who maketh the way of devotion firm in his heart shall be cut away;

He shall restrain his mind, obtain happiness, and mediate on Him alone who possesseth all qualities and yet possesseth none,¹⁰³

Saith Rav Das, my thirst hath now ceased;

I repeat the name of God and perform

His service.¹⁰⁴

Liberation, thus, is the removal of ignorance and all its consequences, and is possible only while living in the body. The state of enlightenment is one of living redemption. It does not involve the physical transformation nor the physical transportation of the *jīva*, rather it is a state of mind that can be attained here in this life. He who attains divine knowledge attains the state of deathlessness :

To make butter knowing people churn coagulated milk; *so those who strive for divine knowledge*

101. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 1/1, p. 657.

102. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 3/2, p. 658.

103. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gauḍī, Ravidāsa, 7/1, p. 346.

104. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gaunda, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 875.

Obtain deliverance while alive and are ever at rest.¹⁰⁵

Saith Rav Das, the fear of death and birth fleeteth from him who hath but the light of divine knowledge into his heart.¹⁰⁶

In one of his hymns in measure Gaurī, Ravidāsa gives an interesting account of *begampurā* (the city of no pain). This in fact is the description of the state of liberation or the kingdom of God. It is a place free from sorrow and pain; free from the cares and worries of the world, and from the fear of being fallen away from the Lord. It is a place of eternal bliss, where contented persons, free from desire and greed, dwell. It is a place where there is freedom from all kinds of restraints. The company here is that of the liberated and holy persons :

There is a city named Beghampur,
Where pain and sorrow find no place;
There is no fear of tribute or of tax;
There is no care, nor sin, nor dread nor death;
Now have I found an excellent abode
Where ceaseless happiness doth reign my friends.
There firm and for aye is sovereignty of God,
No second or third is there adored,
He ruleth alone;
Inhabited and ever famous is that city;
Its people are full dowered with wealth.
Theirs it is to wander as they please;
None restraineth them known in the palace,
Saith Rav Das, emancipated tanner,
My friends become my fellow
citizens there.¹⁰⁷

The attainment of this state is the final end of all the religious strivings. According to Ravidāsa it is a state of living redeemed (*jīvanamukta*) where the *sādhaka* breaks his bondage and completely merges with God. The characteristics of the redeemed person are not different from God. He in fact is a god on earth. His life now is a tool in the 'hands' of God to further His purpose of redeeming the whole mankind.

105. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Bhairo, Ravidāsa, 4/1, p. 1167.

106. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Sorathi, Ravidāsa, 3/4, p. 658.

107. *Gurūgranthasāhib*, Gaurī, Ravidāsa, 2, p. 345.

CONCLUSION

In these concluding pages, it would be appropriate to synthesize the results of our study and appreciate the contribution of Santa Ravidāsa towards the life and thought of India, in a particular context. It has already been noticed that the specific details of his life and activities are not available, but the sources provide considerable information, allowing us to form a general view of the life of the Saint.

It was in or around Banārasa, the centre of the Brāhmaṇical Hindu religion, that Ravidāsa was born in a *śūrdra* family. During this period of ascendency of Muslim rule, characterized by an intense struggle and interaction among religious, social and political forces, systematic efforts were being made to weaken the religions of Indian origin. The *sūdras* during this period were being doubly oppressed. Along with the members of higher castes they were oppressed by their political masters; and they were also the victims of the cruelties of the higher castes, in general, and the *brāhmaṇas*, the custodians of Hindu religion, in particular.

Santa Ravidāsa was brought up in an ordinary cobbler family, according to the customs and norms of the society. Most probably, he was never initiated into traditional learning. From the very beginning of his life, he showed an uncommon interest in the life of devotion to God. He must have started waiting on saints and serving them with devotion from the very childhood on. Always absorbed in the devotion of God, he was most contented with his own position and profession. Sometimes he would donate to the needy the shoes that he would make to earn his livelihood. It was in the company of holy men that he learnt of the traditional religions and religious

practices. His uncommon activities and absorptions must have attracted the attention of Svāmī Rāmānanda, who was liberal enough to initiate him into the spiritual life. His intense devotion for God bore fruit and he tasted the bliss of divine union.

His initiation into the spiritual life must have invited the fury of the *brāhmaṇas*. Their opposition continued for a long time without in the least affecting the devotional activities of Ravidāsa. He continued worshipping God along with a handful of his disciples. He would impart religious instructions to those seekers who visited him. His reputation as a great religious teacher spread far and wide and people would come from great distances to meet him and adopt him as their guide. Kings and queens were among his followers; even the *brāhmaṇas* also regarded him as a realized soul. His place became a holy resort for the saints who would visit him to have dialogues and discussions on religious issues. Later on some of these dialogues and discussions were written down by sectarian writers. It is evident from the source materials that he did not leave his profession even after his reputation as a great saint came to be established. Possibly in the later days of his life he undertook extensive journeys to far off places to meet people and share the fruits of his own realization with them.

This in brief is the life story of Ravidāsa. His religious and social contributions towards Indian life however are far greater than his simple life-story might imply.

His religious contributions consist in reviving and revitalizing the essential spirituality, that had been lost in the external formalism and ritualistic practices devoid of inner content. This essential spirituality had almost lost contact with day-to-day life. It had ceased to be a living force. Religion had come to be equated with outward performances and ritualistic activities only. Santa Ravidāsa, through the example of his own personal life, showed the inner spirit of religion, vitalizing the daily life. He rejected and disregarded all those elements that

tend to veil the inner spirit of religion and hinder its application in the practical life. Thus he purged the spirit of religion from the outward ritualistic crust and wrong practices and revived the eternal inner spirituality, acceptable to all genuine religious people. In this way he reunited and restored the divorced spirit of religion to life.

Regarding the reformatory zeal of Ravidāsa S.N.Dasgupta writes, "His songs and hymns are full of humility and devotion. However, he evidences none of the reformatory zeal that animated Kabir".¹ The learned scholar in his estimation of the reforms of Ravidāsa has failed to recognize the intense reformatory zeal covered by the tone of the saint's humility. Ravidāsa's approach to reform was certainly not that of Kabīra. Instead of directly hitting at the higher castes and showing them their real poverty and smallness, he undretook to raise the dignity of his own caste and profession, so that the higher castes came to realize the shallowness of their self-imposed superiority.. Ravidāsa kept engaged in his profession in order to show that God is not the monopoly of the higher castes only. He also purifies those "whose touch would defile the world". Thus Ravidāsa gave dignity to the profession that unfortunately had come to be regarded disgraceful. Not only this, his conception of God as the 'Uplifter of the lowly', 'Purifier of the defiled' and 'Deliverer of the poor' reflects his reformatory concern for the downtrodden. He repeatedly confessed his humble birth and profession, but along with this he claimed, that the *brāhmaṇas* of good conduct came to bow before him.

His approach was realistic and practical. It convinced the *śūdras* of the purity and dignity of their caste and profession. His efforts gave altogether a new outlook and attitude to the people of India towards the so called low castes and disgraceful profession. In this he emphasized the purity of labour. It was in the vision of Santa Ravidāsa that downtrodden classes found their social and religious freedom. Because of these reforms he has been regarded as the messiah of the *śūdra* class. Soon

1. S.N. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism*, (Delhi, Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1976), p. 162.

after his passing away, he came to be identified with the liberation of the low castes; and till today the very name of Santa Ravidāsa is the light that guides them out of slavery and suffering to the attainment of liberation and Immortality both religious and social.

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